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ALL FOOLS



# ALL FOOLS

*BEING THE STORY OF SOME VERY  
YOUNG MEN AND A GIRL*

BY

MARMADUKE PICKTHALL

||



LONDON

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“ . . . In sober verity I will confess a truth to thee, reader. I love a *Fool* as naturally as if I were of kith and kin to him. . . . I venerate an honest obliquity of understanding. . . . I love the safety a palpable hallucination warrants, the security which a word out of reason ratifies. And take my word for this, reader, and say a fool told it you, if you please, that he who hath not a dram of folly in his mixture hath pounds of much worse matter in his composition.”—*Elia*.



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# ALL FOOLS.

## CHAPTER I.

OF MR. LEE-STRETTON, HIS YEARNINGS AFTER THE ROMANCE  
OF LIFE, AND HOW FAR THEY LED HIM.

MR. DOUGLAS LEE-STRETTON, better known to his immediate friends by the name of "Bunny," had come to London in order to prepare himself by diligent study for a Government appointment, which would, some day or other, be offered for competition. To this end his parents had placed him under the care of one Samuel Thompson, a private tutor of many years' experience, in whose house the dear boy would enjoy every advantage that money can procure. This establishment, like many others of its kind, was located in South Kensington, in that great labyrinth of respectable streets, which lies between High Street and the Cromwell Road. From the window of Bunny's bedroom at the top of the house, the tower of the Imperial Institute was to be seen on a clear day, rising above the waste of roofs with their irregular growth of chimney-pots. But the window also afforded a glimpse of the street immediately below, and, by leaning out, he could observe the passers-by on either pavement.

It was one day, while thus leaning out, pipe in mouth,

that Mr. Lee-Stretton first awoke to the romantic possibilities of this great city. So many girls and young women kept passing, daintily gloved and booted, with feathers waving gracefully in their hats, and figures lithe or trim, encased in the most becoming costumes. To Douglas Lee-Stretton, fresh from the cloister-like seclusion of a public school, each was an angel, nay, a divinity. The great work upon Higher Mechanics, which lay open invitingly upon the little table at the foot of the bed, would not bear comparison with the outlook from the window. His examination seemed very remote, even insignificant. All his life lay before him in which to pass examinations, but here was a problem which, his whole being told him, called for instant solution.

All these lovely creatures, it seemed to him, were going forth to be admired and loved, and, in due course, to fall in love with someone of the sons of men. If only one of them would have the goodness to fall in love with him, what a difference it would make to his life! Almost unconsciously he drew in his head and turned to the looking-glass.

His face was ruddy, wholesome, and—but for a mouth so like a rabbit's as to appropriate the name "Bunny"—not ill-looking. He was clad, after the manner of his kind, in a morning-coat of vivid brown tweed, trousers to match, and a dark blue waistcoat with red spots. A very high collar tilted his chin at an uncomfortable angle, and his tie, a butterfly bow, was gorgeous in dark green and red.

After gazing in the glass for some seconds, he turned away with a complacent simper.

"I'll go, this very evening!" he murmured.

Mr. Samuel Thompson's establishment was strictly limited to seven pupils; but of these only three slept in the house. Mr. Blackstone, a second-lieutenant of militia, who was allowed to entertain the hope of one day passing into the

regular army, occupied the room next door to Bunny's; and a coloured gentleman, reading diligently with a view to the Indian Civil Service, had an apartment on the floor below.

The clock of a neighbouring church was just striking six, when Bunny emerged from his bedroom and made his way downstairs. His hair, parted with scrupulous precision, formed a graceful curve over his right eyebrow. A strong smell of brilliantine went with him.

He stopped at a door on the first floor and knocked.

"Come in," came a husky voice from within.

"Will you excuse me from dinner to-night, sir?" said Bunny, entering.

A little old man sat huddled up in an arm-chair by the window, a weighty volume upon his knees. He must have been dozing, for there was a sleepy peevishness in his voice as he answered:

"Oh—er—yes, yes! I—er—will inform Mrs. Thompson. Er—go along with you!"

"Thank you, sir," said Bunny, and was already closing the door, when his tutor's voice stayed him.

"Er—Mr. Lee-Stretton!"

"Yes, sir?"

Bunny was back in the study again.

Mr. Thompson had risen, and was standing in the middle of the room fingering his eye-glasses. His waistcoat half-unbuttoned, his tie awry, together with a chronic stoop from the shoulders, bespoke the life-long student, the confirmed bookworm.

"Yes, sir?" repeated Bunny, after a prolonged pause. The tutor's wits had evidently gone wool-gathering.

"Er—oh, yes, yes!" said Mr. Thompson, recollecting himself with a snort: "I remember. I—er—wanted to speak to you, Mr. Lee-Stretton. I—er—wanted to warn you against the sin of intoxication."

“But I have never been drunk in my life, sir!” suggested Bunny, with a puzzled laugh.

“No—er—but you may be,” said the tutor, fingering his eye-glasses more assiduously than ever. “I—er—had a pupil once who was a victim to—er—in fact, to chronic alcoholism. And it was unpleasant—very disagreeable, I may say. Young fellows, however nice and gentlemanly, cannot be too careful. Mr. Blackstone has—er—I regret to say, returned home upon more than one occasion in a state of intoxication. He is—er—a very nice, gentlemanly young fellow. Otherwise, I should have requested him to leave—er—in fact, long ago.”

“Indeed!” ejaculated Bunny, for want of something better to say.

“And I had another pupil, years ago—er—he’s a judge in India now—who had a mania for—er—in fact, for getting married. He actually considered himself as engaged to a young woman in this neighbourhood—er—a very low, dressed-up person—the daughter of an artist, I think she called herself. He—er—he had the impertinence to bring her here to dinner once, giving Mrs. Thompson to understand that she was—er—was his sister. It was unpleasant—very unpleasant. He had to pay heavy damages for—er—for breach of promise, I recollect. I wish to warn you, Mr. Lee Stretton, against all females. There are—er—thousands of dressed-up young creatures in this neighbourhood whose dearest wish it is to—er—to capture nice, gentlemanly young fellows.”

Luckily for Bunny, there was but little light in the room, so that Mr. Thompson could not see his blushes.

“All right, sir; I’ll remember,” he said. “Good evening!”

“Good evening, Mr. Lee-Stretton! By the way—er—you’re a nice, gentlemanly young fellow; have a cigar!”

Bunny, cigar in mouth, ran upstairs to Blackstone’s room.



That gentleman was lolling in an arm-chair, reading a novel by the light of a bedroom candle.

“Well, young un, what’s the row?” he asked, flinging the book on to the bed and stretching to the full extent of his six foot four of stature. “That cigar smells good. I don’t mind trying one if you’ve got any more.”

“I say, I’m off for the evening,” said Bunny, ignoring the hint; “but where’s the best place to go to if you want to meet ladies?”

“Depends upon what sort of ladies you want,” said Blackstone, eyeing him curiously.

“Young ladies, I mean, of course,” said Bunny, blushing.

“There’s a girls’ school just round the corner, and there’s a church only two doors off,” suggested Blackstone. “Bless you, bless you, my innocent babe!” he cried suddenly, leaping up and seizing Bunny by the collar.

And he began an excited war-dance round the room, dragging his victim with him.

“I say, shut up, you know!” gasped Bunny, almost purple in the face. “You’re spoiling my collar—confound it!—and I shall have to brush my hair again!”

A loud tapping came from the room beneath them. Blackstone left hold of his victim and listened.

“It’s that fool, Brown Geegee, or whatever his name is. He fancies we’re disturbing him. I say, Bunny, let’s go down and strangle him!”

But Bunny had already made good his escape to his own room. Thence, having changed his crumpled collar for a clean one, straightened his tie, and brushed his hair once more into geometrical smugness, he descended the stairs, took his hat and stick from a peg in the hall, and sallied forth into the street.

A narrowing vista of lamps stretched away into the haze on either hand. The bells of a neighbouring church were ringing to evensong. He turned to the right and

wandered somewhat aimlessly forth in a westerly direction. The glamour of the lighted streets was upon him, the involuntary feeling of fatalism which seizes upon the lonely item of a crowd. Here was he, a more or less irresponsible human being, let loose in this great, orderly chaos of London at night, a newly-awakened sense of its romantic possibilities for his only guide. From a neighbouring street came the semi-martial blare of a German band. Athwart the chaotic straining of tired instruments, he was aware of the notes of a popular air, and his feet kept time to the tune.

Fair creatures of the other sex often passed him, and at such times Bunny's heart beat tumultuously, and his eyes fixed themselves, in spite of him, upon the ground, until the disturbing petticoats became but a dark flutter in the distance.

"This is no good," he thought at length, stopping by a lamp-post to look at his watch. "It's half-past seven, and I haven't dared to look one of them in the face yet. I must find some place to have dinner. A glass of beer 'll put me in courage."

The region into which he had strayed was quite unknown to him. He was in a long street which seemed to end in a blind wall, covered with advertisements, beyond which was a railway line, to judge by the little round lights, red, green, and yellow, which gleamed like eyes out of the blackness, and the occasional shriek of an engine. The houses on either hand were of a dingy, two-storied respectability, of no interest save to their owners. Bunny's footsteps echoed and re-echoed in the deserted street.

He walked up to the wall at the end, in the hope of finding some outlet. There was a little paved passage on the left, between iron posts. It ran along the wall, papered with advertisements, past a row of gloomy cottages, before whose doors a number of children were playing, prone or

on all fours, and ended in an archway beside a glaring public-house.

Through this unsavoury alley Bunny strode, not without misgivings, switching his legs spasmodically with his walking-stick. The children raised a shout of derision as he passed, and a loafer in the doorway of the public-house muttered "Gloves, s'elp me!" and broke into a roar of laughter. Then he passed under the archway and emerged, with a sigh of relief, into a wide and brilliantly lighted street.

He paused before a shop window, and pulled off his gloves, putting them carefully into his pocket. Being peculiarly sensitive to ridicule, the loafer's remark had not been lost upon him.

A little further down the street was an Italian restaurant. The display in the window, consisting of a few tomatoes and some stale pastry, was scarcely appetising in itself. But a smell of fried meat and onions streamed from the open door, hardly to be resisted. Bunny, who was very hungry at that moment, passed into the shop and sat down at a little table with a much-stained marble top, in the corner remote from the street. A waiter in a high state of grease brought him a bill of fare with a whole pattern of dirty thumb-marks upon it; and, during the perusal thereof, dusted the table caressingly and pensively with a soiled napkin.

Bunny chose steak and onions. That would not be ready, the waiter said, for twenty minutes. Bunny could afford to wait. With his latch-key in his pocket, he had all night before him. So he leaned back in his seat, and fell to lighting a cigarette. In so doing, a diamond in the ring upon his little finger flashed in the gaslight. It was not a very large diamond, neither was it a stone of the very first water; still it was a diamond, and of some value. Two Germans, sitting chatting over their coffee, at the next

table to him, grinned and nudged each other, as they noticed it. Besides these two Germans, there was only one other customer in the restaurant—a young lady, immediately facing Bunny, at a table by herself. To this lady, consistently with his character of knight errant, Mr. Lee-Stretton devoted his attention. Though her eyes were fixed upon her plate, and her veil, rolled up under her hat, concealed the colour of her fringe, if she wore such a thing, he could see that she was beautiful. The childish, oval face, the delicately pencilled eyebrows, the arc of each eyelid with its long fringe of dark lashes, the red lips with their slight but infinitely provoking pout—all made an instantaneous impression upon Bunny. She was so prettily dressed, too—just like the ladies he had seen and admired from his bedroom window at Sammy's. That was the sort of girl to fall in love with—a girl, who knew how to dress well and look her best upon all occasions. A man need never be ashamed of a woman like that. She was none of your dowdies anyhow!

While he was thus musing, gazing fixedly at the subject of his thoughts, the lady suddenly raised her eyes and looked him straight in the face. It was really very disconcerting. If she was going to behave like that, he would never dare to look at her again. However, when he at length ventured to glance once more in her direction, her eyes were cast down as before, and he was allowed to gaze at her for some minutes without interruption. He had finished two cigarettes, when the waiter appeared with the steak and onions, and Bunny, being very hungry, fell to with a will.

Now, as it is impossible, or nearly so, for a man to eat steak and onions without an occasional glance at his plate, Mr. Lee-Stretton's eyes were necessarily less entirely at the service of the lady opposite. And the lady opposite, having finished her meal, and being engaged in the perusal of an

illustrated paper, ought certainly never to have looked at Bunny. Nevertheless it is a fact that, so long as the steak and onions lasted, Bunny and the lady opposite were the two extremities of a kind of ocular see-saw, worked from a point midway between them—presumably by the little god of Love, or his baby sister, the infant goddess of Bashfulness. For, whenever Bunny looked up from his plate, the lady opposite looked down at her paper, and whenever the lady opposite looked up from her paper, Bunny instantly looked down at his plate.

The steak and onions and a tankard of beer being disposed of, Bunny called for his bill. At the same time the lady opposite, having buttoned her gloves, drew down her veil, picked up her umbrella, and glided noiselessly from the shop. Bunny was glad that she did it noiselessly. Creaking boots would have come as a disillusion. The Germans still sat at their table. They seemed to watch his movements with some interest.

In a great hurry Bunny paid his bill, and the waiter bowed him to the door. He paused on the threshold to look eagerly up and down the street. There she was, not twenty yards distant, looking into a milliner's window. His heart in his mouth, he approached her with an elaborate flourish of his hat.

“I—I beg your pardon, but I—I hope you enjoyed your supper!”

“Very much, thank you,” said the girl, laughing. “But why do you ask? I don't think I have had the pleasure of meeting you before!”

“Oh, pray, don't mention it!” murmured Bunny irrelevantly, again raising his hat. “But I say, you know! you ought not to be out alone at this time of night. I should like to escort you home, if you'll allow me.”

She looked up into his face with an amused smile.

“I can take care of myself, thank you,” she said. “I'm

a Londoner, you see, and that means a good deal to a girl. I can get on quite well alone."

The look of disappointment which overspread Bunny's face at these words would have melted a harder heart than ever beat within a maiden's stays. Besides, it was such an honest face—so guileless, so easy to be read. Noting all these points in his favour, she relented and said :

"However, I shall be very glad of your company, if you don't mind walking part of the way with me."

"Delighted!" murmured Bunny, and they walked on side by side.

Here was a wonderful chapter of accidents. If Bunny had never taken to looking out of his bedroom window, or, looking out, had confined his attention to the tower of the Imperial Institute and the heavenward aspect of things, he would never have wandered out in search of adventure. And if he had never set out in search of adventure, he would never have come upon the Italian restaurant. And if he had not been very hungry, he would never certainly have been tempted by the show of tomatoes and pastry in the window. And if he had never set foot in the restaurant, he would never have set eyes on the pretty girl now walking by his side. And if his courage had not been strengthened by the infusion of a certain quantity of beer into his system— But where was the good of tracing it all out? There she was at his side, and he suddenly awoke from his reverie to the fact that she was asking him a question.

"Do you live anywhere about here?"

"To tell you the truth I don't quite know where I am."

"This is Bilbury Road, West Kensington or Hammersmith, whichever you like."

"By Jove, though, I must have come a long way!" cried Bunny, aghast. He knew vaguely that Hammersmith was on the river, somewhere between Putney and Mortlake,

having read as much in reports of the University boat-race. "I say, I've got to get back to South Kensington to-night."

"You're a country bumpkin, anyone can see that," she laughed. "What a funny boy you are!"

"I know London pretty well," he said, with some dignity, "but not this end. What's that?"

They had left the more crowded streets behind them, and were now walking along between two rows of semi-detached houses, each with a small patch of garden in front. Gas-lamps here were few and far between. The girl stopped and looked round, startled by the suddenness of her companion's exclamation. She had a mass of rich brown hair coiled simply under her hat, and the nape of her neck shone white as ocean-foam as she bent forward to listen.

"I see nothing," she said. "How you made me jump!"

"I thought I saw a man slinking along by the railings," said Bunny, half-ashamed of himself. "I could swear I saw him run past that lamp over there."

"The wind is rising," said the girl reassuringly. "It makes the shadows of the shrubs move in a horribly weird way. Will you tell me the time at the next lamp, please? I'm afraid it must be getting dreadfully late, and I'm bound to be home by ten."

It was only just nine o'clock, and Bunny had little difficulty in persuading his enchantress to prolong their walk. But she rejected the offer of his arm with something very like disdain, stamping her foot imperiously, and calling him a silly boy, when he protested with an introductory, "I say, you know," that it was "too hard on a fellow."

So they walked on side by side, chatting friendly enough upon all manner of topics, until the lady turned sharp round, and declared that it was time to go home. The wind had by this time driven what fog there had been into

the remote distance. The moon, almost a perfect disc, had risen above the chimney-pots to eastward, and every house, every lamp-post, every pillar-box, was a rudimentary study in black and white.

"I must say good-night here," she said, with a little sigh. They had come to a point where a road branched off to the right. "Thank you so much! Good-night!"

"But I say, you know!" exclaimed Bunny, loth to release the hand she had given him, "I can't let you go like this. Why, you haven't even told me your name!"

"Millicent Woodward."

"And your address?"

"You'll never remember it," she said, hesitating. "Besides, what can it matter to you?"

"It does matter very much to me," protested Bunny fervently. "I—I think I should die if I thought I should never see you again!"

Moved by this touching appeal, even to laughter, Miss Woodward gave him her address, and having accepted Bunny's card in exchange, was about to hurry away, when he detained her.

"I say, I can't really part from you like this, you know, Miss Woodward," he said. "When shall we meet again? We might have dinner together, and go to the theatre or something. Which evening shall it be?"

"I can't possibly go out in the evening, it makes me so late getting home. But I can manage a matinée. Could you be at Victoria (Underground) Station on Saturday about one o'clock. I go to business in the City every day, you see, and so I'd rather not come back all this way to Kensington if I could help it. Are you quite sure that will suit you?"

Bunny was quite sure.

"But I say, you know," he pleaded, blushing at his own



effrontery, "would you very much mind if I gave you a kiss?"

He seized her hand, but she broke away from him, and, with a merry laugh, ran off down the road. When she had passed the first lamp-post she turned and waved her hand.

"Don't forget Saturday!" she called.

"I sha'n't forget! No jolly fear!" shouted Bunny confidently.

## CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH, TO QUOTE FROM THE LATIN GRAMMAR, "FORTUNE PLAYS AN INSOLENT GAME" WITH MR. LEE-STRETTON; WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF THE HEROIC CONDUCT OF AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN.

BUNNY watched her out of sight, and then looked at his watch. A quarter to ten! He had had enough of romance for one night. He would go home and think it over at leisure. Saturday was not so far off, that was one blessing.

But this region was quite unknown to him. In which direction was South Kensington, he wondered. However, it was no good waiting there at the corner of two silent and deserted streets. He would walk back by the way he had come, and ask the advice of the first human being he should meet.

He had gone about two hundred yards, when a man started out from the shadow of the houses and barred the way before him. He fancied that it was one of the Germans who sat near him in the restaurant. The man's attitude was defiant, even threatening.

"Can you tell me the shortest way to South Kensington, sir?" faltered Bunny, in great trepidation.

The man seemed puzzled. He scratched his head, and it was some seconds before he answered.

"Ach! You ask me de way?"

"I say, I should be much obliged if you could tell me, you know!" said Bunny.

"Come! I will show you," said the man. "But I have

a friend who—ha, ha!—have also lost his way. Wo bist du, Fritz?”

A second figure emerged from the shadow of the houses. There was no doubt about it now in Bunny's mind. These were no other than his neighbours of the restaurant. He might have been mistaken in one, but the two together left no room for doubt.

“Fritz, my friend, you have heard? De mister vant know de vay to Sout Kensington. You also vish to go to Sout Kensington. Come! I vill show you even de shortest vay!”

Bunny felt the strongest distaste to a walk in such company. He had the true British distrust of everything foreign, and the man's broken English seemed more sinister than even his former aggressiveness, to Mr. Lee-Stretton's mind. But there was no help for it.

The German who had first appeared led the way, while Fritz linked his arm in Bunny's and sputtered German-English in his ear with easy familiarity. In this order they threaded their way through a maze of more or less respectable roads, until they came to a noisy, squalid thoroughfare, where public-houses and fried fish shops seemed to do a thriving trade, and where costers cried their wares upon the edge of the pavement by the light of flaring torches, whose flames blew this way and that, as if their object were to find something worth setting on fire. Then the guide turned into a side alley, having a blind wall on one hand and some tall, dilapidated houses on the other, and knocked at a door.

“But, I say, surely this can't be the way to South Kensington!” Bunny exclaimed, turning up his nose at the wretched appearance of the street and the evil smell thereof.

At that moment the door was opened from within.

“I tell you it is de shortest vay!” said the guide, with an impatient shrug.

“But, I say, you know—”

He got no further, for at that moment Fritz gave him a sudden and violent push, which sent him sprawling into the dimly-lighted passage. Then somebody sat upon him, and crushed most of the breath out of his body. The door shut with a bang, and he could hear someone putting up the chain.

“Now den, get up!” cried the guide. At the same time the weight was removed from his body. Bunny rose, conscious of many bruises, and looked about him with dazed eyes.

The guide was standing beside him, holding his walking-stick, dropped in the fall, at a threatening angle. Fritz had picked up his billycock hat, and was stroking its crown lovingly in the first rapture of possession. A fat, Jewish-looking woman, very dirty, was standing at the foot of the stairs with a candle in one hand. With the other she was busy rearranging her skirt, which gave signs of recent crushing.

“Leeza, you are vun big dam fool!” said the false guide, turning angrily to the woman. “Vat for you vant to sit on him vid de candle in your hand? You shpoil his nice new suit vid de grease!”

“Fool yerself!” said the woman. “Why, if I ’adn’t set upon him that very minute ’e’d as like as not ’ave got up and made a bolt for it, and we’d ’ve ’ad the slops round in no time!”

“Vel, it no goot talking!” put in Fritz impatiently. “Ve have business to do, and ve must do it kvick!”

“Ach, so! Come, mister! Come vid me!” said the first speaker, and, snatching the candle from the woman, he led the way upstairs.

Bunny had no choice but to obey. He followed the German to a dingy room on the first floor, redolent of beer and stale tobacco-smoke. Thick brown curtains of once

good material, now faded and moth-eaten, concealed the window. The floor was uncarpeted, but had once been stained and varnished. The table lacked one leg, but this want was supplied artificially by means of a packing-case set on end. A sofa, whose stuffing bulged out at twenty rents, was set against the wall; an arm-chair with no casters stood beside the fireplace; three or four cane-bottomed chairs and a coloured print of the German Emperor above the mantelpiece completed the furniture of the room, whose general aspect was shabby in the extreme.

The guide, having set down the candle, turned to Leeza and Fritz, who had just entered, and said a few words to them in a low tone. Then he stepped across to the door, which he locked, putting the key in his pocket.

"But, I say, let me go, you know," Bunny began to protest. "It's too bad! I wanted to know the shortest way to South Kensington, and you—"

"If de mister make any fuss, ve show him de shortest vay to heaven—not so, Fritz?"

Fritz grinned assent, showing a row of yellow teeth, broken in two places.

"Now, you do just vat I tell you. Give me de diamond ring!"

Bunny obeyed with an inward groan. The utter helplessness of his position was maddening. Besides, he had been so happy only a few short minutes ago in his new-found romance.

"Now, then, you've got what you wanted. Let me go," he exclaimed, in a voice choking with anger and mortification.

The two Germans looked at each other and laughed.

"I dink ve have not kvite done vid de mister yet—eh, Fritz?"

"Not kvite—only vun leetle minute longer," responded Fritz, with an evil chuckle.

Bunny saw plainly that anger would not help him. It only provoked the mirth of his tormentors. He did his best to seem at ease. Glancing round the room with a nervous assumption of unconcern, his eyes encountered the portrait of the German Emperor.

"Rather a good likeness, I should think," he said, eyeing the print critically. He had an unreasoning desire to turn the conversation from himself for a while, and thus gain time for thought.

"Now, den, mister, shtrip," said the spokesman, paying no heed to this pitiful attempt at diversion.

"What?" cried Bunny, his eyes starting out of his head with amazement and horror.

"Shtrip!"

"But, I say, you know, I can't, really," he protested, with a blushing glance at the Jewish-looking woman.

The Germans broke into a shout of derisive laughter.

"Ach, I forget!" exclaimed the spokesman, in mocking tones. "Leeza, you vicked, unmodest, damfool woman! De mister vish to undress himself. Get away at vunce!"

"'Ow can I get away, when you know you've got the key in yer pocket?" said the woman, with a grin.

"Ach, so! See, I unlock de door. Now, go kvickly. And, Leeza, bring de new clodes for de mister. and put dem outside de door."

The door was again locked, and the German repeated his order.

"Shtrip!"

"But, I say, you know!—"

"Shtrip, I tell you!"

There was nothing for it. Bunny divested himself of his coat and waistcoat.

"Now let me go," he said.

"Shtrip," cried the German angrily. "Go on shtripping. Shtrip as naked as ven you vas born!"

Bunny muttered a monosyllabic curse, which set both the men laughing afresh. He removed his garments one by one, until nothing was left. Then he shivered, and his bare feet were painfully conscious of little inequalities in the floor.

Fritz took possession of the cast-off garments, and retired with them to the sofa, while his companion unlocked the door and stepped out. He reappeared at once with what seemed, at first sight, to be a bundle of rags, from which a pair of tattered boots depended. He flung the bundle down at Bunny's feet.

"Dere, put dose on," he said.

"But, I say, you know, this is robbery. Give me back my own clothes," cried the victim, with a shiver.

"Dese are your own clodes. I give dem to you. De exchange is not robbery, say de English. So also say de Germans. Stay, I vill help you. I vill be your *valet de chambre*."

Nothing was to be gained by resistance, and it was impossible to leave the house naked. Bunny, with the aid of the German, donned the all too scanty supply of rags; and at length, the boots being fastened with string, his toilet was declared complete.

"Vait," said the German, regarding Bunny with a nicely critical eye. "Your face is too clean."

He plucked a piece of coal from the grate and rubbed his hands upon it. Then he fell to fingering Bunny's face and neck assiduously, and finally, having rubbed his victim's hair into disorder, and set a battered billycock upon his head, stood back to survey the whole.

"Shplendid!" he cried. "But vait! I vill show you to yourself."

He fetched a cracked hand-mirror from the mantelshelf and held it before Bunny, who uttered a cry of despair at what he beheld there. Was it possible? Could it be really

he? From earliest childhood, a belief had grown up with him, that a gentleman will seem a gentleman, whatever his garb, even though reduced to beggary; now he was cruelly disillusioned. He saw in the mirror before him the hang-dog face of a confirmed ne'er-do-weel of the criminal class. In time past, he had never looked at that sort of person without a shudder. It seemed hard to believe that a little coal, a suit of rags, and a battered hat could suffice to transform Douglas Lee-Stretton, a young gentleman with pretensions to dandyism of a horsey kind, into the revolting picture of crime and wretchedness now before his eyes.

He shuddered, as the mirror was withdrawn.

"Now let me go!" he said.

"Yes, now you vill go!" said the German mockingly. "I vill show you de shortest vay to Sout Kensington. Come, Fritz."

He had already unlocked and opened the door, when Fritz said something to him in German.

"Ach, I forget!" he exclaimed. "Dere is vun leetle ding ve must do to you, mister, before you go."

He drew from his coat-pocket an exceedingly dirty handkerchief, and proceeded to blindfold Bunny, tying the bandage so tight that it made the patient's head ache.

"Oh, I say, you know—" protested Bunny.

"It no goot talking! Come, Fritz."

Bunny was hustled from the room, the Germans taking each an arm. Downstairs they went, and then down more stairs, to a place where the air was chill and clammy and there was an earthy smell. Bunny shuddered, remembering Monte Cristo and his dungeon. Then, for some time, they seemed to go round and round in a circle. Then came more stairs, ascending this time. They went along a passage; then a door opened in front of them and shut behind them. The night air blew cold upon Bunny's face,



and showed a surprising knack of finding out the weak places in his tattered garments. His boots scrunched on gravel. A gate was opened, and Fritz went forward, to reconnoitre presumably. Then he was hustled on once more, and his unwieldy boots clattered on pavement. For what seemed to him a very long time, he was led on, round sharp corners, across wide roads, now going fairly straight, now travelling in a circle. He realised that all this was done to mystify him, and fancied that one and the same street was the scene of all these manœuvres.

At length a heavy footfall was heard approaching.

"It de damfool slop," cried Fritz hastily. "Let loose de bandage—kvick!"

After some fumbling, which involved such pulling of hair as sent the water to the victim's eyes, the knot was untied and the handkerchief was hastily removed from Bunny's face. The two thieves took to their heels.

It was some time ere Bunny recovered from the dazed condition in which they left him; and, when at length he looked about him, they were nowhere to be seen.

"Now, then; move on. None o' your loit'rin' about 'ere." The heavy hand of a policeman was laid upon his shoulder.

"I say, you know, I wasn't really loitering," murmured Bunny apologetically. "I've been robbed and ill-treated, that's all! Will you kindly tell me the shortest way to South Kensington?"

"None o' yer cheek," said the constable impatiently. "You know the way to South Kensington as well as I do; get along with yer."

Forgetting his rags for the moment, Bunny adopted a dignified tone.

"I think you are a very insolent chap," he said. "I shall remember your number and report you."

"Now, then, no more o' your play-actin'. Move on, I

tell yer. If you want to go to South Kensington, get along ; I can't 'ave you loit'rin' about 'ere."

The inclination of the policeman's head, as he spoke of South Kensington, gave Bunny a useful hint as to the direction in which that much-wished-for goal lay. He set off without more ado, the loose soles of his boots, clattering unevenly as he went.

The policeman looked after him, not without suspicion.

"That's a smart young chap," he mused. "'E's got the accent of the Arry Stockrussy wonderful pat. But 'e overdoes it—there's the rub—'e overdoes it. They all do. That's 'ow they're copped at last. Too many 'I says' and 'you knows'; but I shouldn't wonder if that young chap 'ad a great future before 'im in the burglary line, if only someone 'd lend 'im a decent suit o' clothes."

Bunny hurried on through the pale lights and black shadows of the moonlit streets, keeping as far as possible in the direction indicated by the policeman, until he came to a place where five roads met. Here he was again at fault. In despair, he was about to take the road which led nearly straight ahead, when the door of a house close by opened and a gentleman in evening dress came down the steps.

Raising his battered billycock, Bunny accosted him.

"I beg your pardon, but I say, can you tell me the nearest way to South Kensington? I've lost my way. It's beastly awkward, you know!"

The gentleman stared aghast at him, hastily buttoning his greatcoat to hide his gold watch-chain.

"Well, you're the rummest beggar I ever met," he muttered. "Here's a copper for you, my man! Go up that road, take the first turning on the right, then the fourth on the left, and keep straight on, and you'll come to South Kensington Station."

The gentleman passed on, leaving Bunny staring, with

tears in his eyes, at the penny which had been given to him. The cup of his degradation was full to overflowing. What would Miss Woodward think if she could see him now?

Choking down a sob, he set off once more and, by dint of following the directions given with the penny, arrived at length at his tutor's door. His troubles were over at last. He would creep quietly up to bed, and nobody would be any the wiser. His right hand wandered to the place where his trouser's pocket was wont to be. Then he remembered! His latchkey was in the pocket of his trousers in the German's house at Hammersmith, or wherever it was.

He must knock and ring. Perhaps somebody might still be awake. Brown Geegee, the coloured gentleman, often sat up reading until one and two in the morning. He went up to the door and gave a loud double knock. How it echoed in the silent street! Then he rang the bell.

After some delay the door was stealthily opened a very little way, and a brown face with bright almond eyes peeped cautiously out.

"Oh, Brown Geegee, old chap! It's only me!" cried Bunny wistfully.

But Brown Geegee had seen quite enough of the disreputable visitor upon the doorstep. With a shrill cry of "Murder!" he slammed the door in poor Bunny's face. The chain rattled into its place and, to make security more sure, Brown Geegee evidently leaned his whole weight against the door, for a dull thud followed the rattle of the chain.

Bunny was in an awkward position. That cry of murder would surely bring a dozen policemen to the scene of the supposed crime. He must hasten from the spot, unless he wished to be arrested on suspicion. But to go away would be to give up his last chance of going to bed that night.

A bright idea flashed upon his brain. At the back of the house there was a small garden with a gate abutting on another street. From the top of the garden wall he might manage to climb on to the roof of the class-room, within easy reach of Sammy's bedroom window.

He hurried round the corner to the garden gate and, without much difficulty, gained the top of the wall. But to climb to the roof of the outhouse was no easy matter. After many fruitless attempts, he at length succeeded in getting firm hold of the gutter-pipe, and was preparing to pull himself up, when—crash! a whole length of the piping broke away beneath his weight and fell with a great clatter upon the gravel below. Luckily for the safety of his limbs, he had not quitted his foothold upon the wall.

The noise did not pass unnoticed. The window of Mr. Samuel Thompson's bedroom was flung open and a female head thrust out. A piercing shriek rent the night.

"Fire! I mean, thieves!"

Bunny crouched low, so as to be hidden from sight. He was just within the shadow of the house, and the moonlight, which played upon the garden and the rest of the wall, only made the darkness of his corner more black and impenetrable. He had had no time to grow used to the discomfort of his cramped position when the door leading to the garden was unbolted, and Brown Geegee stole cautiously forth. He carried in his hand a gun of very ancient make, which was wont to hang in the tutor's study. It had been loaded for twenty years past in case of emergency.

Bunny, crouching upon the wall, heard a stealthy tread upon the gravel below, and looked down.

"Brown Geegee!" he murmured soothingly, "dear old Brown Geegee! Good old chap, don't make a fuss! It's only me—Bunny!"

But Brown Geegee did not wait to hear the end of his

speech. At the first sound of his own name he flung his gun far from him and fled into the house, crying :

“ Murder ! Devils ! ”

A piercing shriek came from the bedroom window above.

“ Murder ! Help ! Police ! ”

It was followed by a loud, unnatural laugh. Then came another shriek, then more laughter. Mrs. Thompson, a nervous lady at the best of times, had taken refuge in hysterics.

Upper windows were now thrown open all along the street, and the night was troublous with angry cries of “ Police ! ”

Bunny lay prone along the top of the wall, scarcely daring to breathe. He believed that the end of the world was come at last. His heart beat so loud that the sound of approaching footsteps seemed distant and unreal by comparison.

“ Get over the gate, Tom, and search the garden while I stand 'ere and guard the wall ! ”

There was a mighty panting and puffing as some heavy body clambered over the gate. Then came a dull thud, followed by the scrunching of gravel.

“ All right, Tom ? ”

“ All right ! ”

Heavy footfalls grated on the gravel below. Then came a whistle.

“ 'Ave you found him, Tom ? ”

“ No, not 'im ; but I've found 'is gun.”

“ Whew ! Attempted burglary with violence — that's what it is ! ”

There was a shuffling sound upon the pavement. Someone in slippers was drawing near.

“ Have you caught him, Mr. Policeman ? ”

It was the voice of Brown Geegee.

“ No, sir, not yet ; but we've got is gun. Must be a

'ardened villain or a madman to carry such a weapon as a gun about with 'im."

"Oh!" gasped Brown Geegee. "Then he might have killed me when I went out into the garden to look for him. Catch him, Mr. Constable—catch him quick, and let me spit upon him!"

"We'll catch 'im, sir, never fear," said the policeman confidently.

Bunny could bear it no longer. He scrambled to his feet and stretched out his hands entreatingly.

"Brown Geegee, old chap, don't you know me?"

There was a muttered curse in Hindustani, a violent shuffling, and Brown Geegee was nowhere to be seen.

The policeman laughed up in Bunny's face.

"'E's left his slipper be'ind," he remarked, with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the coloured gentleman's flight. "Now then, my fine feller, you'll get five years 'ard for this night's work. 'It his legs with the gun, Tom, and I'll catch 'im as he falls!"

But Bunny did not wait for the bruising of his nether limbs. On hearing the order given, he leapt from the wall, almost upsetting the constable in his passage to the pavement.

"Now I've got yer!" said the man, recovering his balance, and seizing Bunny's arm in a tight grip. "'Ere's your 'at. You may as well put it on, else you'll catch cold and cheat the 'angman."

By the time the battered billycock was adjusted to the constable's satisfaction, Tom had scrambled back over the gate, gun in hand.

"Shall we take 'im straight to the station?" said the first policeman.

"Best take 'im into the 'ouse first and see if there's anyone can identify 'im," said Tom decidedly. "But 'ere comes that negro gent again; 'e'll serve our turn. And from all

I can 'ear, 'e's the principal witness. Come to look for 'is slipper, I shouldn't wonder!"

Bunny was too frightened and bewildered to take any part in the conversation.

"Ha! you have got him safe!" There was a satanic chuckle, and a pair of bright almond eyes gleamed out of the shadow of the wall. "Let me look at him close."

"Oh, Brown Geegee, don't you know me?" cried Bunny wistfully. "Doesn't the sound of my voice tell you who I am?"

Brown Geegee started back in alarm at being thus addressed by name. Then, remembering that his enemy was a prisoner and disarmed, he grew bolder.

"Yes, I know you," he hissed between his clenched teeth—"I know you quite well! You are the wicked devil-man who knocked at the door and rang the bell, and tempted me with soft speaking to let you in! You are the filthy satan-man who sat upon the wall and never told me you had a gun to kill me with it! I think you are not only one devil—you are the transmigrated soul of ten thousand black devils! Oh, yes, I know you!"

Brown Geegee's voice grew louder and shriller as he proceeded:

"Ha, I hate you! See, I stamp my foot at you! Hold him very tight, Mr. Policeman; I wish to spit in his face."

"No, no, sir; don't you go insultin' a chap when 'e's down!" said Tom reprovingly. "That sort o' thing's all very well among heathen gentlemen like yourself, but it won't do among decent, clean-faced Christians."

"Oh, Brown Geegee, dear old chap, don't you know me? I'm Bunny," moaned the prisoner.

"Ha, is that your name?" cried Brown Geegee, to whom, in his then excited condition, the nickname conveyed no idea. "It is a satan-devil-bad name, and you are a satan-devil-bad man!"

“Your name, please, sir?” said Tom, the policeman, producing a notebook.

“Baraoniji.”

“’Ow do you spell it?”

Brown Geegee entered upon a voluble explanation, half in Hindustani, half in English. The policeman made a plausible guess, and put back his note-book.

“Good-night, sir!”

“Good-night,” said Brown Geegee, shuffling off. “You take him to the dungeon? Good, I will tell the judge all about him, and he will be damned to deadness! You wicked-satan-devil filthman, I spit upon you in the spirit!”

With the coloured gentleman’s insults ringing in his ears, Bunny was marched off to the police-station.



## CHAPTER III.

WHEREIN THE WORKINGS OF A PRISONER'S MIND ARE  
LAID BARE FOR THE READER'S INSTRUCTION.

"WHAT is your name?" asked the inspector, when the prisoner was brought before him.

"Douglas Lee-Stretton."

The policemen looked at each other and grinned.

"Any other names—aliases, or anything in that line?"

"No."

This inquiry took place in a large room dimly lighted by two gas-jets. At a wooden barrier stood Bunny between the two policemen, his captors. On the other side of the barrier sat the inspector, pen in hand, with an open ledger upon the table before him. Behind, near the door, the latest arrival, a gentleman in the stupid stage of intoxication, awaited his turn in charge of a policeman.

"The charge?" asked the inspector.

"Attempted burglary with violence."

"Witnesses?"

"Me and Tom 'ere, and a native gent, name o' Boanerges."

"But, I say, that's not his name at all, you know," Bunny broke in. "His real name is Brown Geegee—B—R—O—"

"Silence! this is a serious case." And, without more ado, Bunny was consigned to the lock-up for the night.

Thanks to the gravity of his supposed offence, he was allowed to spend the dreary hours alone. His little bare

cell was many degrees more comfortable than the large and exceedingly dirty room where "drunk-and-disorderlies," and other minor offenders were constrained to pass the night. As he lay on the hard mattress provided for his couch, his wakefulness hovered among the events of the night, distorting and exaggerating, until they took the gruesome forms of a horrible nightmare. Sleep was quite out of the question. Shrieks and groans, varied with an occasional burst of tipsy laughter, resounded through the building. A woman's voice rose from time to time above the din, calling in shrill tones to be let out, and dying away in a volley of curses.

But with the first grey of dawn came comparative quiet. An occasional moan, indicative of utter prostration, was the only sound that reached Bunny's ears. Daylight streaming into his cell relieved his mind of the self-created horrors of the night. The fact that the sun was rising once more was in itself reassuring. Bunny had feared that, after such dreadful adventures, all would be chaos, that he would live evermore in a world of nightmare. But the certain knowledge that the outer world was still spinning on its old, orderly course through space, helped to restore some order to the confusion of his thoughts.

Still, one thing troubled him. Had Miss Woodward—the charming, distracting, tantalising Miss Woodward, who had been in his mind all night, half goddess, half fiend—had Miss Woodward taken any part in his robbery? Was she in league with the Germans? Had she decoyed him to a lonely place that the ruffians might rob him at their leisure?

She had pooh-poohed his notion that someone was following them he remembered. That seemed to point to her complicity. What was more likely than that she should be in league with the villains—perhaps the wife of one of them? Yet, in spite of all evidence, Bunny could not

bring himself to believe her guilty. He recalled her every word and look during that glorious moonlight walk, and his inmost heart acquitted her with honour.

While he was yet absorbed in such thoughts as these the door of his cell was unlocked, and a policeman entered, bringing a can of coffee and a chunk of bread.

"'Ere's your breakfast," said the man gruffly. "Make 'aste!"

Bunny took a sip of the brown mixture, then set it down with a mighty gulp.

"It—it's poison," he gasped.

"No, it ain't. It's coffee, so none o' your sauce!"

Then a bright idea came to Bunny.

"Can I send a telegram from here?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, if you pay for it."

"But I say, you know! I have no money at all!"

"No money, no telegram."

"But, I say! Couldn't you manage to send it for me? I will reward you handsomely later on."

"Gammon!" said the policeman, thrusting his tongue in his cheek.

"But, if you send the telegram, I shall be let out very soon. It's all a confounded mistake."

"Is it a witness you want to write to?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Bunny eagerly. "She can identify me. She can tell you that I'm a gentleman—not a burglar, or anything of that sort."

"She!" said the policeman scornfully. "If it's your sweet'art you're after you may as well spare yerself the pains. 'Er evidence won't do yer character much good."

"No, no. It's not my sweetheart," said Bunny impatiently. "Do make haste about the telegram!"

The man took a notebook from his pocket, and proceeded to take down the message from Bunny's dictation.

“Millicent Woodward,

“15 St. Christopher Avenue,

“West Kensington.

“Please come at once to Kensington Police Station. Have been arrested by mistake.—LEE-STRETTON.”

“Is that all?” asked the policeman.

“Yes, that’s all. Only, please, send it off at once!”

Bunny sank back upon his mattress, well pleased with the subtlety of his stratagem. If she came in answer to his appeal, she was innocent; if she failed to appear, she was guilty. It was simple as A B C.

Then, with a shudder, he remembered his rags. He would not like her to see him thus. It would wreck her good opinion of him for ever. Girls were so susceptible to outward appearance and all that sort of thing. He half hoped that she would not come, after all. But then she would be guilty!

His brows knitted to a frown.

“What a fool I am!” he muttered. “I ought to have wired to Sammy or Blackstone. They could have got me out at once. The girl must have bewitched me!”

He would have liked to recall the message, but it was too late. Besides, he feared the policeman’s grin. The hours wore on, bringing no Miss Woodward with them. She was guilty by his own showing. And yet he was glad that she had not come to see him in his rags. If his dirty face and changed aspect had so terrified Brown Geegee, they would surely drive a dainty, delicately-nurtured girl into hysterics.

He began to invent excuses for her. She was so young, so innocent, and the Germans had doubtless given her to understand that it was all a joke. The scoundrels were quite respectably dressed, he remembered. She might well have been taken in by them. But, under all these ex-

cuses, lay the firm conviction that Millicent Woodward was innocent, simply because she was Millicent Woodward, whatever the facts of the case.

At length the door of his cell was again opened, and two constables came to take him to the police-court. Bunny asked leave to wash his face and hands before going. This was granted, and, after the necessary delay, he was led out, greatly refreshed, into the street, where Black Maria was in waiting. A group of little children and loafers jeered at him as he took his seat, together with other unfortunates, in the gloomy vehicle. But Bunny scarcely noticed them. His troubles were almost at an end. The police-magistrate was a gentleman and could not fail to accept his explanation and let him go free.

## CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH, BY THE BRUTALITY OF MR. BLACKSTONE, AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN IS CONSTRAINED TO APPEAR IN A POLICE-COURT, TO THE DELIGHT OF ALL BEHOLDERS AND THE SALVATION OF MR. LEE-STRETTON.

THERE was little in the outward appearance of Mr. Samuel Thompson's abode to distinguish it from other houses in the same neighbourhood. It was a corner house, and, but for a glaring excrescence at the back, in the shape of a new class-room, just like any other corner house. But the windows of this class-room were dim with the accumulated dust of weeks—it was not worth while cleaning them until the young gentlemen should go away for their holidays, Mrs. Thompson had told the housemaid—and were further embellished by sundry initial letters scratched upon the panes. These initials were the handiwork of Mr. Arthur Blackstone, who had once a diamond ring belonging to him. One night, returning home in a state of generous intoxication, he had given the ring to a passing policeman, as "a slight token of his (hic) respect and admiration for the force." But the scratches on the pane were not to be parted with so easily.

When Mr. Blackstone came down to breakfast on the morning after the attempted burglary, he found Brown Geegee devouring a kipper, with one eye on the morning paper.

“What was all the row about last night, Geegee?” he asked.

The coloured gentleman laid down his knife and fork to stare, his eyes almost starting out of his head.

“Don’t you know?” he exclaimed.

“Now, Geegee, don’t be a fool!” said the militiaman impatiently. “How should I know? I woke up last night to find a beastly row going on—people yelling ‘Fire!’ and all that sort of thing. But, by the time I got to the window, it was all quiet again.”

“It was burglary and black-satan devilry, that’s what it was!” said Brown Geegee solemnly, handing the newspaper across to Blackstone. “It’s in the right-hand corner, just above the weather paragraph.”

Blackstone took up the paper and read :

“ATTEMPTED BURGLARY IN SOUTH KENSINGTON—HEROIC CONDUCT OF AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN.—About one o’clock this morning, a burglarious attempt was made upon the house of Mr. Samuel Thompson, a private tutor, in Tenby Gardens, South Kensington. Mr. Boanerges, an Indian gentleman, one of the pupils, who happened to be working late, heard a noise and rushed into the garden. He saw a man upon the garden wall, clinging to the roof of an outhouse, with a gun in his hand, and at once, regardless of personal danger, gave the alarm. Thanks to the heroic conduct of Mr. Boanerges, the police found no difficulty in securing the person of the ruffian. It is conjectured that the burglar is a lunatic, as surely no sane robber would have carried so cumbrous a weapon as a gun with him.”

Blackstone laid down the paper with a gasp.

“Well, I’m blowed!”

"Boanerges—that's me!" spluttered Brown Geegee, his mouth full of kipper.

"But how did the newspaper chaps get to know of it?" asked Blackstone, puzzled.

"I told them," said Brown Geegee, his almond eyes twinkling with glee. "A man came up to me in the street, when the prisoner was being taken away, and asked me all about it. He said he was a Central Press or something respectable, so I told him. Then he went off to the police station to find out more."

"He got your name wrong, old chap!" Blackstone suggested.

"Yes, the silly foolman! But I will write and explain my real name, and moreover I will tell them what a damfool-black-satan-devil fellow the prisoner is!"

Blackstone burst out laughing.

"What do you laugh at?" asked the coloured gentleman, in an injured tone of voice.

"Don't get wild, Geegee! I can't help it. You look so like a rat when you're excited, that I feel as if I ought to be a terrier and go for you."

"No, no! No humbuggingness!" cried Brown Geegee in alarm, raising one arm to shield his head. "I am weak this morning—very debilitated after my exertions of last night. Do not assault me, Blackstone! . . . Good-morning, sir! "

The greeting was addressed to Mr. Thompson, who at that moment entered the class-room. He was clad in dressing-gown and slippers, and fingered his eye-glasses in his wonted, nervous manner.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he replied, with a precise little bow. "I—er—wanted to ask you to set to work, when you have done your breakfast, without waiting for me. I—er—I have had a very bad night." He passed his hand across his forehead, as if to brush away the memory of it.



“My wife—was—er—very much upset by the event of last night. She is—er—I regret to say—laid upon a bed of sickness. I fear that I shall be obliged to send for a—in fact, for a medical attendant.”

Blackstone and the coloured gentleman made haste to assure him of their sorrow and sympathy.

“Er—is that nice, gentlemanly young fellow, Mr. Lee-Stretton not down yet?” pursued the tutor, glancing round the bare walls of the class-room. “I fear that, in spite of my repeated warnings, he returned home last night in a state of—er—of intoxication. I have noticed that after a night of—er—of dissipation, young fellows, however nice and gentlemanly, always oversleep themselves.”

“All right, sir! I’ll see to him,” said Blackstone cheerily. “I’ll take him up some soda-water and a kipper as soon as I have done my breakfast.”

“Er—thank you, Mr. Blackstone. Be—er—be so good as to inform the other young gentlemen of my indisposition.”

With a snort of relief—the little old tutor sniffed and snorted upon every occasion—Mr. Thompson took his leave.

“Poor old Bunny!” said Blackstone, with a grin, “I expect he’s awfully down on his luck this morning. He’s a bit green as yet.”

“Bunny!—Bunny!” muttered Brown Geegee. “The fool-ragged filthman told me his name was Bunny. It is a devil-ugly name.”

“What?” roared Blackstone. “Tell a plain tale, Geegee, you ass, without any of your satan-devil tomfoolery! No humbug, or I’ll go for you!”

Brown Geegee shrank to the furthest corner of the room.

“The wicked-ragged burglarman called me ‘Brown Geegee’ and ‘Don’t you know me,’ and told me his name

was Bunny," he said hurriedly. "Now I have told you all. Do not assault me, Blackstone, or else, moreover, I shall be very angry with you and call for the police."

But Blackstone paid no more heed to Brown Geegee's threat-strengthened entreaty, than if the coloured gentleman had been a little speck of dirt on the wall of the room. He opened the door, darted down the passage, and rushed upstairs, three steps at a stride.

"He is mad," muttered Brown Geegee, recovering his self-possession. "He is also a black-satan fool, and I spit upon him in the spirit."

There followed a creaking of banisters, and a mighty shaking of the whole house, as Blackstone vaulted the last six steps in his descent. The door of the class-room flew open, and the gigantic militiaman, rushing upon Brown Geegee, seized him by the collar and shook him until the ill-starred coloured gentleman was quite limp and breathless.

"Come along up to Sammy, you idiot!" he thundered.

But Brown Geegee had no power of speech or motion left in him. Blackstone was obliged to carry him upstairs in his arms. The tutor opened his dressing-room door in answer to Blackstone's knock.

"What's the matter?" he asked, with a sniff. "You are nice, gentlemanly young fellows, both of you, but I—er—I fear I must really beg you to make a little less noise; my poor wife is—er—is laid upon a bed of sickness. Have you no bowels of compassion?"

"I must speak to you, sir!" said Blackstone, in a tone so peremptory that the meek little tutor joined them in the passage at once. "This ass—Brown Geegee here!—has had Bunny—Lee-Stretton, I mean—sent to the lock-up on a charge of burglary."

"It is a nasty-satan lie!" panted Brown Geegee indignantly. "I sent a ragged filthman heroically to the lock-up, who tried to kill me with a gun."

“Hold your tongue, Geegee!” said Blackstone, giving the coloured gentleman a violent shake. “From what I can learn, sir, Lee-Stretton had been robbed of his clothes and had a beggar’s get-up given him in exchange. Geegee took fright at the rags, and made him out to be a burglar.”

“But—er—excuse me,” interposed the tutor, with a series of excited snorts, “am I to—er—to understand that Mr. Lee-Stretton—nice, gentlemanly, young fellow—has not yet returned?”

“His room is empty. His bed has not been slept in.”

“Dear me! How very unfortunate! And—er—you suggest that he is at present in the lock-up? This is terrible—terrible. I shall go to the police-station in the course of this afternoon, and—er—inquire. I suppose that I shall be obliged to go bail for him. Many years ago, when a pupil of mine, who was—er—who was a victim to chronic alcoholism—a nice, gentlemanly young fellow he was, I remember—was locked up, I was obliged to go bail for him. It is very unfortunate.”

“I think I’ll get into a hansom and drive to the police-station at once,” said Blackstone. “And I’d better take Geegee with me, as it’s all his fault.”

“Mr. Blackstone, you are a nice, gentlemanly young fellow,” said the tutor, with a snort of relief. “Your presence of mind, and—er—energy, do you credit. If you will wait one moment—er—I should like to offer you a cigar.”

It was Mr. Thompson’s custom, whenever he approved of the conduct of one of his pupils, to offer the “nice, gentlemanly young fellow” a cigar. He kept a store of Havanas expressly for this purpose, himself being no smoker.

“Get your boots on, Geegee!” said Blackstone, climbing the stairs to his bedroom, cigar in hand. “If you aren’t

ready by the time I come down, you'd better look out for yourself!"

Terrified by this threat, Brown Geegee shuffled to his room, and made haste to drag on his boots—patent leather boots with elastic sides, about which he had been mercilessly chaffed, when he first came to Sammy's. Then he ran downstairs, or rather shuffled, for it was not in his nature to raise his foot more than an inch from the ground. The other pupils were beginning to arrive. A red-headed youth with a freckled, stolid face, was just freeing his latch-key from the door, when the coloured gentleman reached the hall.

"Sammy wishes you to begin work without waiting for him," said Brown Geegee, assuming an air of importance. "He has an indisposition. Moreover, his wife is laid upon a bed of sickness. I say," he added, sinking his voice to a whisper, "have you seen the newspaper this morning? No? Then you will find it in the class-room. Look in the right-hand corner, just above the weather paragraph. 'Heroic Conduct of Boanerges'—that's me!"

"Poor Geegee! Right off his chump!" mused the red-haired youth, as he made his way along the passage. "Ought to be sent to an asylum."

At length Mr. Blackstone came downstairs, the ends of his dark moustache curled to a nicety, and the two sallied forth in search of a hansom. There were no less than three of these vehicles in waiting upon a cabstand round the corner, and, the driver of the foremost having been unearthed from the shelter, where he was smoking a pipe, the horse was deprived of its nosebag, and the pair, jumping in, were soon rattling through the streets on their way to the lock-up.

"The chap as was took up last night for burglary, sir? 'E isn't 'ere, sir. 'E started for the police-court five minutes ago," was the answer to Blackstone's question at the station.

"Where is the police-court?"

"'Ammersmith, sir."

Blackstone rushed out again into the street, dragging Brown Geegee with him by the arm. Their hansom had not yet driven off.

"Hi, you man! Drive to Hammersmith police-court for your life!" shouted Blackstone, pushing Brown Geegee into the cab, and jumping in after him.

The driver whipped his horse to a rickety canter, and they jolted along at a pace which attracted the notice of passers-by on either pavement, and drew upon them the gibes of bus-conductors and carmen.

"I say," said Brown Geegee, when he had somewhat recovered from the shock which the jerky energy of Blackstone's proceedings had given to his nervous system; "I had an invitation this morning to the very same address."

"What address?" asked Blackstone impatiently.

"Hammersmith police-court," replied the coloured gentleman. "A constable called very early this morning and left the invitation for me. I forgot all about it till now."

"What an ass you are, Geegee!" said Blackstone paternally. "Now, don't go making a fool of yourself before the magistrate. Remember that the prisoner is a friend of yours. Speak of him as your old friend, Lee-Stretton. If you speak of him as a burglar or use any of your insulting expressions, I'll strangle you, and you'll be whipped for contempt of court into the bargain."

"All right," said Brown Geegee sullenly.

Arrived at their destination, Blackstone gave half-sovereign to the cabman, and strode into the court with Brown Geegee close at his heels. They were just in time. A ragged young man of beggarly appearance was undergoing examination. The magistrate's face wore a puzzled expression. The onlookers were convulsed with laughter.

Blackstone elbowed his way to the front rank, dragging Brown Geegee with him. At sight of the prisoner, the latter emitted a low, grating noise, like the snarl of a dog, exposing two rows of gleaming white teeth. He rolled his eyes, so that only the yellowish whites of them were visible.

"That is the wicked-satan-filth burglarman!" he hissed between his clenched teeth.

"Shut up, Geegee or I'll go for you!" whispered Blackstone fiercely.

"So you still persist in your statement?" the magistrate was saying. "Your name, you say, is Douglas Lee-Stretton, and you are a private pupil of the gentleman whose house you attempted to enter by force last night?"

"I say, I am really Douglas Lee-Stretton, you know!" pleaded Bunny, almost tearfully. "It's all quite true."

"Then why," said the magistrate, with a pleased smile at his own sagacity—"why, I ask, did you carry a gun with you, if you wished to effect a peaceable entry?"

"But I never had a gun, you know," Bunny protested.

"Produce the weapon!"

The magistrate nodded to a policeman, and the antique gun was handed into court.

"Oh!" cried Brown Geegee, unable to control his astonishment, "that is Sammy's rifle, which I took with me to shoot the burglar with it!"

The spectators chuckled.

"Silence," thundered the magistrate.

One of the policemen stepped forward and said something in a low tone.

"Bring him to the witness-box at once!" said the magistrate aloud.

The policeman passed the word to one of his comrades, who went round and tapped Brown Geegee on the shoulder.

"Your evidence is wanted, sir," he said; and the

coloured gentleman was led away captive from Blackstone's side.

"What is your age, Mr. Boanerges?" asked the magistrate, when Brown Geegee had been duly instated in his new dignity of witness.

"Twenty-and-two," said the coloured gentleman visibly flustered.

"Your occupation?"

"I study at present to prepare myself for the Indian Civil Service examination."

"Thank you. Now, be so good as to state as briefly as possible all that you know of the prisoner."

Brown Geegee began excitedly :

"I was working late last night, the front door knocked and the bell rang. I went to the door and I opened it and I looked out. Then I saw that black-sa—"

"Stow it, Geegee, or I'll go for you!" a deep voice resounded through the court.

"Silence!" thundered the magistrate. "Constable, turn that man out. Stay," he added, scenting further evidence, "bring him here and let him say what he has to say after Mr. Boanerges has finished. Go on with your evidence, if you please, Mr Boanerges."

"—So I shut the door and put up the chain, and went back to my work," pursued the coloured gentleman, still trembling from the interruption; "and then, after that, I heard a great noise and people crying 'Fire—thieves,' so I took a loaded rifle from Sammy's study and crept out into the garden. Then the wicked badman tried to kill me with a gun, so I threw away the rifle and ran back into the house, calling for the police."

"Your heroic conduct has excited much admiration in the newspapers, I believe," said the magistrate grimly; "do you recognise this weapon?"

“Yes; that is the rifle I took with me,” said Brown Geegee, rolling his eyes and grinning nervously.

“Then one part of the charge—the violence—is disposed of. Have you anything more to say, Mr. Boanerges?”

“Yes. This morning I find out that that ragged-dirty badman there is my dear friend and pupil-fellow, Lee-Stretton.”

“Then the prisoner’s statement is correct?” said the magistrate, turning to Bunny.

“I always told you so, you know,” said that worthy, more cheerfully than he had yet spoken.

“Thank you, Mr Boanerges, I need trouble you no further,” said the magistrate, with a bow to the coloured gentleman; “but, since your heroism has been the subject of eulogy in the morning papers I cannot let you leave this court without a slight tribute to your folly and cowardice, which seem to be egregious.”

Brown Geegee now retired, and Blackstone, who had been waiting in charge of a policeman, was brought forward for examination.

“What do you mean, sir, by interrupting the proceedings of the court by trying to intimidate a witness?” asked the magistrate angrily.

“I’m awfully sorry,” murmured Blackstone, abashed; “but I heard Brown Geegee making an ass of himself and I couldn’t help calling out.”

“Who is it that you call Brown Geegee?”

“The poor heathen who has just given evidence.”

There was a roar of laughter from the spectators. The magistrate frowned.

“But his name is Boanerges. He answered to the name of Boanerges.”

“He goes on the principle that any name’s as good as his own, and better,” answered Blackstone, with the air of one



who explains the nature and habits of some strange animal. "He'll answer to almost any name you choose to call him. I call him Geegee myself generally."

The court was again convulsed with laughter. Even the magistrate smiled, but he quickly remembered his dignity.

"Please to recollect where you are," he said coldly. "Personal anecdote is out of place here."

"I'm awfully sorry," murmured Blackstone.

"But, I say, won't you let Lee-Stretton go now?" he added pleadingly. "I brought Brown Geegee down here on purpose to get the poor chap let off."

"You are also a friend of the prisoner?"

"Rather! Why, I sleep next door to him."

"Very well, then. Mr. Lee-Stretton is at liberty to return to his friends. May I suggest that he should be conveyed home in some closed vehicle. Otherwise his rags, though not in themselves remarkable, would attract some attention, seen in the company of two well-dressed persons. It is the most curious mistake that I have ever met with in the course of my long experience."

So Bunny and his rags went back to Mr. Thompson's in a fourwheeler with both windows up, and in the company of Blackstone and Brown Geegee. The coloured gentleman still showed the strongest distaste for the close neighbourhood of the quondam burglar. He shrank to the furthest corner of the cab, rolling his eyes and showing his teeth from time to time to avoid all contact with one whom, until so lately, he had deemed his most deadly foe.

Not until Bunny had had a bath and changed his clothes, did Brown Geegee fully realise that the "satan devil-filthman" was no more.

"Ha!" he said, shuffling forward to shake hands with the transformed burglar, who entered the class-room, blushing violently. "It is yourself, I see. Let me grasp your hand in friendship. I am delighted to have been able to

obtain your release from the satan, son-of-an-owl judge this morning. Do not thank me, I pray you ! It is nothing !”

And he smiled, showing his white teeth, until his sleek, brown face was all creases and puckers, and his eyes became mere twinkling slits—for all the world, as Mr. Blackstone justly remarked, like one of his country’s gods, or the Prince of Darkness himself.

## CHAPTER V.

CONTAINING SOME ACCOUNT OF MISS WOODWARD AND HER FAMILY, NOT FORGETTING THE MAID-OF-ALL-WORK.

ST. CHRISTOPHER AVENUE, West Kensington, was among the newest eruptions of that insidious disease of the earth's face—the bricks-and-mortar leprosy, which, fostered and fed abundantly by the mercantile spirit of the English, has crept so far and achieved so much that it has come to be considered as a national institution, and therefore as unassailable. Its oldest house was ten years old, its newest scarce six months. The genuine inhabitants were city to a man, and that man kept a draper's shop in Hammersmith. But one house in the Avenue was rented by a gentleman of Asiatic, nay, Sultan-like, morality, for a certain exquisitely-coloured flower of his harem. And a red lamp over the gate of the corner house gave warning of the man of blood and bones who lurked within.

The houses were small and semi-detached, with little strips of tessellated pavement leading from iron gate to dark-green door with brass handle and knocker. Each dwelling was of red-brick, and had an excrescence in the shape of a bow window, built square out of deference to the architecture, which was supposed to bear some mystic relation to Queen Anne through Kate Greenaway. There was something of the upstart in this Avenue, with its affected, lackadaisical gables and chimneys, sprung up as it were in defiance of the older, stuccoed growth of street, terrace-gardens, and road by which it was on all sides beset.

A landowner, who had long withheld his property from the grasping hand of the builder, had at length succumbed to temptation, and St. Christopher Avenue was the first fruits of his fall. The surrounding streets, respectable by reason of so many years' soot and fog, were cut off at the back from that open view of waste land, over which they had come to arrogate a prescriptive and inalienable right of vision. Only a few months more and there would be no waste land at all for either to quarrel and crow over—nothing but the backyards of dwellings, with an occasional white flutter of under-garments drying upon a line.

Mrs. Woodward, left in comparative poverty by the death of her husband, had taken a house in the Avenue, partly because houses were cheap there, but chiefly because there was an air of smartness and gentility about them. Herself of humble origin, she had offended her husband's relations, during his life time, by the airs she assumed; and, now that he was dead, she stuck to her gentility as his widow with all the tenacity of a limpet upon a pebble.

Finding it impossible, on her reduced income, both to dress well herself and to clothe and educate her children, and not wishing to be sneered at by her neighbours as the lady whose son and daughter went to a board school, she hit upon the happy expedient of going to bed. From that day forth she was an interesting invalid, whose daily exercise was a walk from her bed to her arm-chair and back again. The expense of her wardrobe was thus reduced to the cost of an occasional new night-dress or dressing-gown. At first she thought it necessary to send for a doctor, not without forebodings that he might take her case seriously, and make it the pretext for a long bill. But the doctor, a busy young man, said: "Pshaw! there's nothing the matter with you. Perhaps a little bilious, that's all," and prescribed a peculiarly nauseous compound by way of medicine.

She never sent for him again.

By dint of staying in bed, and talking of her ailments with the friends who called to inquire, she became in time something more than a *malade imaginaire*, began to suffer something of the pains she so pathetically described. Still, her position as an invalid had its advantages. Only thus could she avoid feeling the pinch of her altered circumstances. Lying in bed, she had only to ring a little hand-bell and the maid-of-all-work appeared, ready to do her slightest bidding. A duchess with a hundred servants could desire no more. Thus she was enabled to give her son and daughter a pretty good education at day-schools in the neighbourhood, though always with the idea that they should, some day, earn their own living. Millicent was soon of an age to relieve her mother of the cares of house-keeping, so that the invalid could be happily lachrymose in bed with her novel and light refreshment at all hours of the day.

Ladies whom she had taught to think her a long-suffering woman, who had once moved in the best society, called in the afternoons to enliven her with the local gossip. It was by the kind interest of one of these friends that her son Percy ultimately obtained a clerkship in a small branch bank at Hammersmith, and was enabled to keep himself in clothes. About the same time Millicent was taken away from school, and began to attend daily at an establishment where shorthand and the use of the typewriter were taught at low fees. Thence she finally obtained a place in a large City firm, where five or six ladies were employed as clerks.

But although her children were now earning money, and the immediate cause of her self-seclusion was removed, Mrs. Woodward remained an invalid. The ease and comfort of that lazy life were not to be lightly foregone. Besides, both her children believed in the malady to a great extent, and would have been vastly surprised, and not a little alarmed,

had she suddenly walked downstairs. So she stayed where she was, leaving her son and daughter to their own devices. No wonder, then, that Percy formed friendships with young men at whom his mother would have shuddered had she chanced to meet them; or that Millicent, following the example of other maidens of the avenue, and spurred to emulation by the talk of her companions at the office, took to flirting immoderately with the young men of her acquaintance.

Heart-whole, she flirted purely for the fun of the thing, without the least backthought of love or marriage. She was, therefore, greatly annoyed, not to say insulted, when her brother told her that one of his friends—a man without an “h” in his alphabet—was deeply enamoured of her, and was rich enough to marry whenever she chose. She was in no hurry to get married, she assured Percy with indignation, and, when she did think of settling down, she would look beyond the vulgar circle of her brother’s friends for a husband.

This fastidiousness of hers—her “side” as Percy phrased it—was the cause of frequent bickering between brother and sister when they met at meal-times. More than once Millicent had taken supper—a cup of coffee and some cake—at an Italian restaurant, which lay in her way from the station, rather than go home to a quarrel with her brother.

Never had she stood in greater need of a mother’s care and guidance than now, on the threshold of her womanhood; but Mrs. Woodward neither sought nor desired her daughter’s confidence. Whenever Millicent had brought her troubles to the invalid’s bedside, her mother had made light of them, chilling and harassing the girl with a very sleet-storm of cheap platitudes—washy, but stinging. Upon the whole, she found more solace and sympathy in her pillow than in her mother, and her pillow had been until lately her chief confidant.

But now she had—what girl has not?—a bosom friend. One of her fellow-clerks, Rose Langley by name, had felt drawn to Millicent from the first. Of her own age, pretty, and disposed to be flighty when not under the eye of the prim maiden aunt, with whom she lived—she brought but little ballast to the friendship. Rather, suffering from repression at home, she egged Millicent on to do outrageous things, in order that she might enjoy, through another, experiences which were denied her in person. Such was the young lady, whose advice Miss Woodward proposed to seek, respecting her conduct in the case of Mr. Lee-Stretton. A flirtation with a boy like that was quite harmless, and meant nothing, she assured herself. Still, she felt the need of a second opinion before carrying it further; and whom had she to consult but Rose? Such were her thoughts over-night. In the morning, the adventure had lost much of its attraction and seemed of little moment.

Musing upon these and other matters, she was standing before the looking-glass, a picture of drowsy loveliness, combing out the radiant tangle of her hair. It was a sunny morning, and her eyes often wandered from her occupation to gaze longingly out over the waste land, where the foundations of houses yet to be built stood up like ruins from among a desultory growth of cabbages. What a lovely day for a walk, she thought with a yawn. And there was she, doomed to be cooped up all day long in a musty old office in the city. How she wished that the office had been burnt down in the night, that the Fenians, or Anarchists, or some other obliging people might have made it their business to blow it up!

She was still combing lazily away at her hair, her mind at work upon such destructive wishes as these, when there came a knock at the door.

“Come in,” she cried.

"A telegram for you, Miss Milly," said the maid-of-all-work, panting with ill-suppressed excitement.

She held an envelope of the colour of terra-cotta, wrapped in a corner of her apron, lest her hands, soapy from recent scrubbing, should defile it. Her sleeves were rolled up to within five inches of the shoulder, baring the seasoned redness of forearm and elbow.

"A *telegram!* for *me!*" cried Millicent, tearing the envelope with her forefinger.

It seemed almost like an answer to those unspoken and unspeakable wishes of hers.

The maid-of-all-work stood by, open-mouthed. A telegram was to her a fearful and wonderful thing, a matter of life and death, a question of hysterics.

"Jane, can you tell me the right time?" asked Millicent, frowning over the contents.

"The dinin'-room clock said ten minutes past ytc, when I come upstairs, miss."

"Thank you. You needn't wait, Jane. There is no answer."

"Yes, miss," said Jane, somewhat irrelevantly, dragging her reluctant feet from the room.

"I can't possibly do it," Millicent thought, as she made haste to finish her toilet. "I've been late at the office once already this week. I daren't risk it. Besides, I don't see what good I could possibly do by going to see him. I can't afford to go bail for him, and I know nothing of his character, poor boy—except that he struck me, last night, as being a good-tempered simpleton. I'll try and get up to the police-station in the lunch interval."

She fell to wondering upon what charge he could have been arrested.

"Such an innocent, fresh sort of a boy, too," she thought. "But then all those crammers' fellows drink horribly, and drunken people are often locked up. I'll give him a good



scolding when I meet him on Saturday. Indeed, I have a great mind not to meet him at all, after this. It's great impudence of him, to wire for me to go and see him at a horrid, low place like a police-station."

Her thoughts were still running in this groove when she ran down to her mother's bedroom to say good-morning. Mrs. Woodward had, by her own showing, passed a bad night; but that caused her daughter no uneasiness, for the good lady looked particularly well and comfortable among her cushions.

"You are rather late," remarked Percy, with his mouth full of toast and sausage, when, a few minutes later, she entered the dining-room. "What was the telegram about?"

"Oh, nothing much!" said Millicent evasively. She did not wish her brother to know that one of her admirers had got into trouble and looked to her for help. Percy was only too apt to sneer at, and even get in a rage about, the weak-brained dandies of tender age, who formed his sister's little court. His next remark, though a random shot, struck very near the mark.

"One of the babes got into trouble—eh?" he suggested with a sneer, as he wiped his moustache after a long draught from his coffee-cup. "Tumbled out of its 'pram' and sent a wire to its mammy to come and pick it up, I shouldn't wonder?"

He noticed the angry flush that mantled in his sister's cheeks with unconcealed delight.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" he cried, leaning back in his chair to enjoy the show at ease. "Come, Mil, make a clean breast of it!"

In spite of his jesting manner there was a note of command, almost of anger, in Percy's voice, very offensive to his sister's ears.

"You are talking great nonsense," she said disdainfully.

“Has Jane taken mother’s breakfast up yet?”

“You won’t get out of it that way, Mil, so don’t you try it on!” he persisted, twirling his moustache and eyeing her suspiciously. “Come now,” he added, in a lighter tone, “tell us all about it. I swear not to laugh. Was the ‘pram’ much hurt?”

“You are very rude,” said Milly, recovering from her first confusion. “But I suppose one can expect nothing better, considering the company you keep. How’s the wonderful Debating Society getting on?”

Now this Debating Society—modestly called “Parliament,” after that more numerous assembly at Westminster, whose forms of procedure it followed, so far as they could be gathered from the newspapers—was Percy Woodward’s hobby. He had been its founder, and he at present held the post of Prime Minister—an honorary sinecure, which gave him that superiority over the other members which he felt to be his due.

He lived for the Society. He would, if need were, have died for the Society. He lay awake at nights, thinking of his speeches, and was apt to be disagreeable at breakfast in consequence, as Milly knew to her cost. But, according to a certain school of amateur physicians, there is one un-failing remedy for all disorders of overnight origin. It is vulgarly called “a hair of the dog that bit you”—the dose to be taken as early in the morning as possible. Millicent, guided by an instinct of self-preservation, had long ago discovered that a deft turn of the conversation in the direction of the Debating Society was usually enough to bring back her brother to the paths of good humour. For, fond as Percy was of teasing and lecturing his pretty sister, and high though he held his responsibility with regard to her moral conduct to be, he was ten times fonder of boasting about the doings of the Debating Society—which is as much as to say, his own doings.

He rose to the bait at once.

“Oh, Mil!” he exclaimed. “I forgot to tell you that Parliament is to meet here this evening. Tell Jane to have a fire lighted in the drawing-room, will you? It makes things look more cosy.”

“No, Percy,” said his sister decidedly. “If you wish to have a meeting in this house, you must have it in this room or in the kitchen. I won’t have a lot of horrid men drinking and smoking in the drawing-room, and making it smell like a beer-shop for weeks afterwards. Just when I’ve put up some clean white curtains, too!”

“Keep your hair on—carrots!” said Percy, planting both elbows firmly on the table and staring impudently across at his sister. “People with that queer, scarlet sort of hair are always losing their temper.”

But Milly did not even flush at the personality. The taunt had lost all point for her about the time she first began to wear long dresses and tire her hair in womanly fashion. She had the honeyed memory of many very flattering remarks and one laudatory ode to counteract the bitterness of Percy’s rudeness. Besides, her hair was not red—not the least bit in the world. If it had a reddish gleam with the light behind it, the fault was in the light, not in the hair.

“You’re getting conceited—that’s what’s the matter with you,” continued Percy, working himself gradually into a temper. “Some fool or other has been telling you that that hair of yours is auburn, or chestnut, or something; but I tell you it’s the colour of a boiled lobster, and I’m impartial enough to please anybody. If my friends aren’t good enough for you, who is, I should like to know? Harry Jones, the Right Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs, drives his own gig, and spent his holidays in Switzerland last summer, as you know very well. I can remember the time when you were glad enough

to let Harry Jones kiss you, and give you chocolates, and so forth."

"Indeed!" murmured Milly disdainfully. "You have really a wonderful memory!"

"I tell you what, Mil," Percy went on, gaining in vehemence what he lost in temper, "if you weren't a fool you'd take more notice of Harry. He's awfully gone on you—has been ever since you were a little ugly thing in short frocks—and you're making a great mistake if you think you can go on flouting and fooling him for ever. He's not the man to stand it, I can tell you."

"You may say what you like, Percy, but you will not have your meeting, as you call it, in the drawing-room," said Millicent calmly. "It's next door to mother's bedroom, remember. She would never get to sleep with all that noise going on."

"Confound the drawing-room! What I wish to say is, that you're getting quite disreputable, Mil. You've been seen walking about with all sorts of dandified young fools. You're beginning to be talked about in the Avenue, and I'll have you know that I won't stand it. Now, it isn't as if you were a girl with no chances. Here's Harry Jones—a man who drives his own gig, and can afford to spend his summer holidays in Switzerland—is quite willing to marry you any day!"

"I am eternally obliged to Mr. Jones," murmured his sister, with a visible effort at self control.

"And you—you spend your spare time loitering about the streets, and carrying on with a lot of lazy young swells who can do you no good, and who mean to do you a lot of harm. I shouldn't like a sister of mine to take to—"

Here Percy's tirade came to an abrupt end, for swiftly, and without a word, his sister left her chair and glided from the room. He caught a glimpse of a pale face with quivering lips, of dark eyes flashing from under a wealth of rich

brown hair ; then he was left to finish his breakfast alone, in the proud consciousness of having done his duty as a man and a brother.

“It’s only one of her tiffs,” he thought. “She’ll think it over in the course of the day, and she’s bound to see the force of what I’ve said. I shall have her kissing and hugging, and begging my pardon this evening.”

Yet he felt uneasy. It occurred to him that he might have slightly—very slightly, of course—overstepped the limits of brotherly authority. Of course, Mil would never really do anything to make her brother blush for her ; but she seemed to him to have been making herself a little too cheap lately ; and who was to take her to task if he didn’t, he would like to know? Still, he had his misgivings. They were strong enough to draw him into the passage.

“Mil !” he shouted, in a tone that was intended to convey a sense of apology to the very top of the house, where Millicent’s bedroom was.

There was no answer.

“I say, Mil, old girl, it’s all right ! I’ll put off the meeting of Parliament till to-morrow—Saturday—if you like.” It would be more convenient, on second thoughts. They could make sure of a fuller house on the last day of the week. “And we’ll have it in the dining-room. Come, make it up !”

But instead of the lovely vision from a higher sphere, which, from his upward gaze, he seemed to expect, a red-armed, print-dressed being, with mouth agape, appeared from the lower regions.

“Miss Milly ’as started for business, sir. I see ’er go out of the back-gyte meself jess this minute,” said the maid-of-all-work, standing in the narrow way between the staircase and the wall, which was the continuation of the little entrance-hall gardenwards. She wiped her hands vigor-

ously in her apron, as her custom was when addressing one of "the fam'ly."

"Oh, damn!" said Percy profanely, and he relapsed into the dining-room. "The coffee's cold," he thought. "I'd better be starting. Mil shouldn't take my lecture too much to heart. Naturally, I can't see my sister making a fool of herself without putting in my word of warning. If only she would marry Harry and have done with it! Marry—Harry! Why, that's poetry, or I'm a Dutchman! I must work it up a bit and give it to the Right Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs. Or I might bring it into my speech on the Budget."

Thus musing, he passed out into the hall, and took up his hat and stick, stooping the while to avoid capital contact with the hall-lamp—a weird thing, crabbed with ironwork, and religious with stained glass—which hung cumbrously low in the passage from the stairs to the front door.

"Jane," he called, going to the top of the kitchen stairs.

"Yes, sir."

He was aware, from a certain squirminess in the voice of the maid-of-all-work, that the hands were being wiped upon the apron as usual.

"Did Miss Millicent say anything about a meeting of Parliament in this house to-night?"

"Yessir; I was to get the dinin'-room ready against yte o'clock, and I was to put as many saucers as I could about the floor for the gentry to spit into."

The girl's tone was very obsequious. Percy's Parliament was to her a great and solemn institution. She had mixed it up in her muddled brain with the more notorious Debating Society at Westminster, and she revered its members as demi-gods. She was even now preparing to scrub and dust the dining-room thoroughly that it might be worthy of guests so illustrious. The reverent tone of the girl had a

soothing effect upon Percy. He twirled his moustache complacently.

"It will not be to-night," he shouted into the black abyss. "Parliament is prorogued until to-morrow—Saturday—evening, at eight o'clock."

"Saturday evenin', yte o'clock," came the echo in Cockney accents from below. "Yessir."

"And, Jane, try and remember to bring all the arm-chairs you can find into the dining-room to-morrow evening, will you?"

"Yessir."

"Good-morning."

"Good-mornin', sir."

And Percy Woodward, with a low bow in passing to that weird relic of the Middle Ages, the suburban hall-lamp, slammed the door behind him, and hurried down the street in the direction of the bank.

Millicent was very careless in her typewriting that morning—at least, so the manager said. But she, for her part, asserted that something was wrong with her machine. In a letter to a firm of milliners it inserted the word "disreputable," rendering the letter of none effect, so that it had to be done again from the beginning; and then, just when the new copy was almost complete, it wrote "Percy," and then "Harry," and then Lee-S—, without the slightest regard for the context. However, the letter was finished at last, with other letters besides, and the luncheon hour arrived.

Millicent resisted the temptation to join Rose Langley and the other girls at a merry if frugal meal at a neighbouring A. B. C. Turning her face resolutely westward, she contrived, with the help of the underground railway, to reach High Street, Kensington, in rather more than twenty-five minutes, and asked her way to the police-station.

"Lee-Stretton?—Mr. Lee-Stretton? No, miss. There's

no one in the lock-up at this moment," said the inspector, into whose presence she was ushered.

Milly showed her telegram.

"Oh, now I remember!" "He's all right, miss. He was arrested by mistake—might have been rather an awkward mistake for him, if his friends hadn't stood by him. He went home in a cab, straight from the court. Your brother, perhaps, miss?"

"No, only a friend."

"Ah!" said the inspector, with knowing sympathy. "Well, I'm glad it's no worse than it is, for your sake, I'm sure. Good-day, miss."

Millicent had to wait ten minutes for a train at High Street Station, and, by the time she reached the office, the other girls were coming back to work.

"It doesn't matter," she thought. "I must be a miserable sort of creature, if I can't go without my lunch for once. I sha'n't miss it a bit."

But, in spite of her assurance, when five o'clock came and work was at an end for the day, she felt weak and giddy, and was fain to turn into a pastry-cook's shop for a cup of tea, before braving the foul air and crowded compartments of the underground.

As it was, when she at length reached her journey's end, she felt tired and very irritable. The thought of meeting Percy once more, after what he had said to her at breakfast that morning, revived all the old shame and anger within her. She would not go home to supper. A cup of coffee and a sandwich at the greasy little Italian restaurant, seemed preferable to a comfortable meal at home, with Percy for companion. How dared he speak to her as he had spoken? The fact that he was her brother only made matters worse. They had been very good friends as boy and girl—such good friends that they had seemed more like two brothers than brother and sister. It was only in



these later, grown-up days that Percy had come to realise that his sister was a very marriageable and, as he considered, highly "flirtatious" young woman.

She found his anxiety about her good name peculiarly offensive. She was very well able to take care of herself, she would have him know. Besides, how was she ever to find the right man, if she confined herself to the narrow circle of her brother's intimates? She was in no hurry to be married, rather the contrary; but still, she supposed she would have to settle down some day in a home of her own, and a husband was a necessary piece of furniture in the house of a dowerless girl.

This evening, as she sat sipping her coffee in the little tarnished restaurant, she felt a strong desire to do something outrageous, just to spite Percy; but the possibilities of the place, at that hour of the evening, were not great, its occupants being limited to herself, the waiter, and a very fat Swiss woman behind the counter. She could not bring herself to contemplate a flirtation with the waiter, who was a foreigner and dirty. Still, something must be done to rile Percy. Happy thought! She would stay out until quite late. That ought to make him anxious.

Having paid her bill, she drew on her gloves, arranged some stray wisps of hair before the mirror, pulled down her veil, and passed out into the street. But before she had gone far, she began to feel tired and the tide of her resolution was on the ebb. Men who passed kept staring at her—rather rudely, as she thought—and one of them actually turned and followed close at her heels, coughing often to attract her attention. How horrid it seemed that a girl could not walk down a public street after dark, without being insulted. She turned sharp round and retraced her steps, freezing her unwelcome follower with a stony stare in passing, and hastened homewards. Better to return and face Percy, than to stay out in the streets and be stared at

and persecuted. There was a lump in her throat, which would have become a sob if she had allowed it.

She could let herself in by the back door, and creep softly upstairs, without Percy ever knowing that she had come in. She would have ample time for her own particular mild form of wickedness on the morrow, when she went to the theatre with Mr. Lee-Stretton. He was such a shy, unsophisticated boy, that she felt sure she could do just what she pleased with him. She might even bring him round home in the evening, just to annoy Percy.

So she lifted the latch of the garden-gate, and crossed the little square of gravel, with its illicit growth of grass and dandelions, making as little noise as possible. A light streamed out through the yellow blind of her mother's bedroom window, bringing an oblong patch of mingled gravel and weeds into undeserved notice. A faint reddish glow from the pane of glass above the garden-door showed that the gas in the hall was burning.

She passed up the steps, and, opening the door noiselessly, entered the passage.

"Lor', Miss Milly! Is it you? I made sure it was thieves!" cried Jane, the maid-of-all-work, peering from the darkness of the doorway, which gave access to the lower regions. "Mr. Percy 'ave been in a way about you. 'E's jess this minute gone round to Mrs. Westerby's to see if you was there."

Milly blushed guiltily. She had thought to make her entry unobserved. It was very annoying to be surprised in this way.

"Lor', Miss Milly!" cried Jane, raising her hands from the apron, and clasping them in an ecstasy of admiration, "you're lookin' jess lovely—that you are! I always did say as you were the prettiest lyedy in all Englan'. 'E'll be a lucky gentleman as gets you, miss."

Millicent felt herself blushing more violently than ever.

Still, it is pleasant to be admired, even by a frowzy, ignorant, little maid-of-all-work. She forgot the angry words that she had had it in her mind to say to Jane, and when she spoke her tone was gentle, even kind.

"Please tell Mr. Percy that I am sorry to have caused him so much anxiety," she said. "I am very tired, and shall go to bed at once."

"Yes, miss."

"And Jane, could you manage to bring me up some bread and butter and a cup of coffee, when you call me to-morrow morning? I am almost ashamed to trouble you."

"That won't be no trouble at all," rejoined the maid-of-all-work emphatically. "Good-night, miss."

Millicent stopped on her way upstairs to say good-night to her mother, and then went to her own room.

"I *will* punish Percy!" she said, addressing her own fair image in the glass, as she sat combing her hair. "And I won't marry Mr. Jones! I don't want to marry anybody just yet."

She looked long and thoughtfully at the picture in the mirror before her, thinking, perhaps, that, as she had such a priceless treasure to give, she would rather bestow it upon a man of her own choice, or at least upon someone more capable of appreciating it than poor, vulgar little Harry Jones. Why, Harry Jones would never notice whether she was nicely dressed or in her oldest rags, except by a snigger. Even that great, silly Lee-Stretton, with his rabbit mouth, and his perpetual "I say, you know!" would be preferable.

## CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH MR. LEE-STRETTON IS IRRESISTIBLY DRAWN TO  
SEE MISS WOODWARD AGAIN ; SUGGESTING THE SIMILE  
OF A MOTH AND A CANDLE.

“I don’t know what to think of it,” said Bunny sadly ;  
“she’s the prettiest girl I ever saw ! And yet, you know,  
her saying that there was nobody following us looks bad.  
But I say, Blackstone, if you could see her figure, and her  
hair, and her eyes !”

He took a long pull at his pipe, closing his eyes the  
better to enjoy the charming memory invoked.

Mr. Blackstone was sitting with his feet upon the mantel-  
piece, his chair tilted at an angle which would have been  
perilous but for the support of the long table behind. As  
he had his back to the gaslight, he was able to watch every  
shade of expression upon Bunny’s face, his own sun-burnt  
visage being in the shadow. He took his pipe from his  
mouth and eyed his young friend critically.

“You’re getting on, youngster,” he said, “but I expect  
the figure is all padding.”

There was silence in the class-room for some minutes,  
broken only by the occasional beat of a horse’s hoofs, or  
the rumble of some vehicle passing in the street without.

“Where’s Brown Geegee ?” asked Bunny at length,  
opening his eyes.

“Upstairs, reading law, or some such rubbish.”

“What an ass he is !”

Blackstone nodded assent.

“But I say, Blackstone, if you could only see the colour of that hair! It’s magnificent, you know!”

“Brown Geegee’s hair is queer, I allow,” said Blackstone, looking at the ceiling.

“Oh, confound Geegee!” cried Bunny fervently. “I mean my girl’s hair—Millicent’s hair!”

“You mean your girl’s hair, Millicent’s hair,” echoed the militiaman, with a touch of irony.

“But, I say, no humbug, you know! What do you think I’d better do? I’m not quite sure whether I ought to meet her to-morrow or not.”

“Don’t!” said Blackstone decidedly.

“But then, if I don’t, I shall never know whether she’s innocent or not?”

“Then do!”

“Yes, I think I shall go to the station at the time she fixed. If she doesn’t turn up, I shall know she has something to be ashamed of. That’s how it seems to me!”

“And it seems to me,” said Blackstone slowly, blowing a cloud of smoke ceiling-wards, “that you’d better know what you mean to do with her before you meet her at the station. Take care to say nothing about weddings, or any humbug of that sort, or you’ll be finding out what breach of promise means in hard cash. A girl like that comes expensive anyway!”

“Shut up, Blackstone!” said Bunny, turning very red. “If I can get engaged to her I shall consider myself an uncommonly lucky chap. Of course, I can’t think of marrying just at present; but next year I shall be twenty-one, and then I shall come into a little money which an uncle of mine left me. Besides, with a girl like that to work for, I shall be sure to do well in my exam.”

Blackstone regarded his companion with a queer expression.

“You’re thinking seriously of marrying the girl,” he said,

“and yet you have reason to believe that she’s in league with a gang of thieves. What will your people say to it, I wonder?”

“I don’t care a hang what my people say! When a fellow gets to a certain age he can act for himself, I suppose. I heartily despise a chap who lets his people choose a wife for him, or marries for money.”

Blackstone smoked on in silence for some time; then he took down his feet from the mantelpiece, and leaned forward to knock out his pipe against the bars of the fireless grate. Glancing sidelong at Bunny, he said:

“I should awfully like to see this beauty of yours. You might ask me to be of the party. I won’t spoil sport, and I’ll pay my share of everything.”

“But I say, Blackstone, old chap, if you don’t mind, I think I’d rather not. I’ve only seen her once before, you know, and—and I should like to have her to myself to-morrow. Some other day I shall be awfully glad to have you with us, but to-morrow—you understand, don’t you, old chap?”

Blackstone stroked his moustache reflectively. His eyes twinkled with amusement as he said:

“What a selfish chap you are. But at least you’ll let me go with you to the station, to console you in case she doesn’t turn up. I promise to go away directly she appears. You can’t very well refuse me that!”

Bunny signified his consent by a reluctant nod, not seeing his way clear to a polite refusal. He had a great respect for the militiaman, as for a man who had seen a vast deal of “life,” and whose knowledge of “the world” was abnormal. But, in his present love-lorn state, he found Blackstone’s cynicism with regard to women offensive. He was disposed to resent the man of the world’s attempt to bespatter his bran-new idol, as a personal insult. He likewise harboured a fear lest Blackstone, who by his own

showing was well versed in the ways of women—witness that remark about padding—should so work his way into Miss Woodward's good graces as to oust poor Bunny from her heart for ever.

He was almost sorry that he had taken Blackstone into his confidence. But his soul, in the kindly relaxation of the after-dinner pipe, had craved a listener, and his choice had been limited to that of the legendary Hobson.

"Well," said the militiaman, refilling his pipe, "you're the queerest chap I ever had to do with. You had a jolly bad time of it last night, all through this precious girl of yours, and yet you're as keen on her as ever. If you mean to shed your clothes each time you meet her, she'll cost you something in tailor's bills."

"I think I shall go to bed now," said Bunny, with a yawn. "I didn't get a wink of sleep last night."

"And you won't get a wink of sleep to-morrow night, I wouldn't mind betting. She'll have you robbed again, as sure as fate," said Blackstone soothingly. "Did Sammy say anything to you about being locked up?"

"Not a word. I expected a lecture, but he only said, 'Good evening, Mr. Lee-Stretton. You are a nice, gentlemanly young fellow. We must get you through your exam.' And then he told me that his wife was 'laid upon a bed of sickness,' and something about a burglar who had 'no bowels of compassion.'"

"That's just like Sammy. He forgets everything. Good-night!"

Bunny's rest that night was troubled by an evil dream.

He was sitting in the class-room talking to Millicent, who, by the way, had her feet upon the mantelpiece, when Blackstone entered, followed by Brown Geegee, the police-magistrate, and a host of constables.

"Strip!" cried Blackstone, looking rudely at Millicent. "That figure is all padding!"

Miss Woodward shrieked, and Bunny rushed forward to her rescue, brandishing a gun. He was suddenly disarmed, and transported to his cell at the police-station. He lay upon the hard mattress, writhing in impotent rage. He could hear Millicent in the public room, shrieking to be let out. Her shrieks died away in a volley of curses. Then he heard the voice of the police-magistrate :

“This is really the most remarkable mistake ! It isn't padding after all !”

He paused to give his words their full effect.

“I need detain you no longer. Your friend, Mr Blackstone, will take you home in a cab. May I suggest a four-wheeler ?”

Bunny made a blind rush for the wall of the cell. It gave way with a crash, and he awoke—to find his bedroom full of sunlight and Blackstone standing beside the bed with a poker in his hand.

“I say, Blackstone, old chap, you're a d—d scoundrel, you know !” he murmured, with sleepy malevolence.

“If you don't wake up properly, I shall have to upset a jug over you,” said the militiaman. “It's getting on for twelve o'clock. You'd better get up, if you mean to keep your appointment with the fair Millicent.”

Bunny sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles.

“Then it's not true,” he muttered ; “I'm jolly glad of it ! But what are you doing with that poker ?”

“I'd tried every way of waking you, short of personal violence, so I was just beginning to beat a tattoo on the bedstead when you opened your eyes. Get up, you lazy hound !”

Bunny was seized by the arm and dragged forcibly out on to the floor.

“Oh, I say, you know !” he protested, on his hands and



knees. "You needn't go knocking a fellow about like that. I feel like one big bruise."

"Dress as quick as you can and have some breakfast, and you'll soon get over it. Are you quite awake?"

"Rather," said Bunny, scrambling to his feet and making for the washhand-stand; "I'll be down in ten minutes at the latest."

"Well, I give you a quarter of an hour. If you aren't down by then, I'll chuck your breakfast out in the street. I've moved it from the class-room to the dining-room to be out of the way of the other chaps, and I've been keeping it there for you ever since half-past nine."

"All right," sputtered Bunny, his dripping face and neck enveloped in a huge towel, "I'll be down in a jiffy."

Some twelve minutes later he entered the dining-room whither Blackstone had conveyed his breakfast, so as not to disturb a French lesson which was going forward in the class-room. The business of eating and drinking was quickly disposed of, for the coffee was quite cold, and the remains of a dish of ham and eggs unpalatable, by reason of much grease. Bunny was in the act of laying down his knife and fork after a brief but manful struggle with his inclinations, when the door opened and the French master looked in upon them.

"But what do you do?" he cried excitedly. "Meester Lee-Stretton—Meester Blackstone! will you do no French to-day?"

"No, thanks, mooshoo," said Blackstone, striding past him into the hall.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," Bunny lingered to explain, "but I'm afraid I've got an appointment."

"Appointment! What appointment? You will never pass your exam., I say! You will never get no appointment whatever—neizer of you," the French master screamed after them; and when, a minute later, they passed out at

the front door, the little man's voice was still ringing through the house in shrill and angry protest.

Bunny paused at a sheltered corner to light a cigarette.

"Try a pipe!" suggested Blackstone.

"No, thanks, it's not the thing to smoke a pipe in the street, you know."

Blackstone withdrew his blackened briar from his mouth and eyed it lovingly.

"You'll outgrow that notion, young 'un," he said. "Of course I shouldn't walk down Piccadilly with a pipe in my mouth, but up here in the mornings it's all right."

They walked on in silence for some time. Bunny, his low-crowned billycock tilted rakishly back from his forehead, held his walking-stick almost by the ferrule, and tapped the calf of his leg from time to time with the handle thereof in a devil-may-care manner. He cultivated a peculiar swagger, supposed in certain juvenile circles to betoken a knowledge of horse-flesh. His trousers were turned up, although the morning was clear and dry, and both pavement and roadway were as clean and free from mud as pavement and roadway can be. In walking he kept his feet well apart, bending his knees outward at every step, and a tendency to stoop from the waist forward gave undue prominence to coat-tails. With elbows raised, he manipulated his cigarette in the most exquisite fashion, conveying it slowly to his lips, taking a leisurely whiff, and then removing it by a graceful and gradual wave of the left arm outwards.

Blackstone, about whose dress and bearing there was no affectation, watched his junior's antics with ill-suppressed glee, little guessing that himself had served, in part, as model for the grotesque figure beside him.

"Do you wear stays, youngster?" he asked, at length.

"Rather not!" said Bunny. "They're awfully bad for a fellow, you know!"

“You look as if you did! What a splendid figure you must have!”

“That’s just what my tailor says,” assented Bunny moodily. “But I own I took some pains about dressing this morning. Girls think such a lot of waistcoats and ties and all that. Do I look all right?”

“Irresistible!” said Blackstone ecstatically. “You look the heavy swell every inch of you!”

“But I say, you know, I don’t want to look too heavy, or she’ll be thinking I’m richer than I really am. I shouldn’t like her to take me for my money.”

“She’ll fall in love with you, right enough. I tell you, man, you’re irresistible!”

“She’s a deuced fine girl!” murmured Bunny, with a complacent smile.

“But, then, perhaps she won’t turn up!”

“Oh, hang it all! Don’t suggest anything so beastly!”

It was a bright, sunny day for London, but a bluish mist lurked in the side-streets and in the distance. A fresh breeze started up at unexpected corners, causing the two friends to clutch wildly at their hats, and making their coat-tails flutter in a vain endeavour to be free. It was a day when ladies of a modest, or indeed of any disposition, love to turn their backs to the wind, lest that libertine, in his wanton caresses, should reveal too much of the human form divine.

They had passed into a more crowded region and were drawing near to the trysting-place, when Bunny suddenly grasped his friend’s arm.

“There she is!” he whispered.

## CHAPTER VII.

WHEREIN THE READER MAY, IF HE CHOOSE, OBSERVE THE WAY OF A VERY YOUNG MAN WITH A MAID.

A YOUNG lady was standing at a street corner, with her back to the wind. One hand was engaged in pinning her hat more securely to her hair, the other held a parasol—an utterly useless appendage on such a gusty day.

“Now, Blackstone, old chap!” said Bunny. “Remember what you said! Go home, there’s a good fellow! You’ve seen her!”

“Yes,” said Blackstone slowly, “but I haven’t seen all of her.”

Bunny’s dream recurred to his mind, bringing jealousy with it. What a beast Blackstone was!

“I haven’t seen her face, you know,” concluded the militiaman. “I’ll be hanged if I can be said to have seen a girl until I’ve seen her face. By Jove! She has seen you and is coming this way. You can’t do less than introduce me, old chap.”

Millicent was indeed coming towards them, fighting her way inch by inch against the wind, for which her skirts and the feathers in her hat seemed to have a strong fascination. Bunny rushed forward to meet her, Blackstone following more leisurely.

“I say, it’s awfully good of you to come, you know,” he began, holding out his hand. “I hope I’m not late. By Jove, though, I’ve had a pretty bad time of it since I saw you last. I’ll tell you all about it while we’re having lunch.

How are you? How stupid of me! Of course you can't shake hands. Oh, I forgot."

Miss Woodward's eyes had wandered to the big militiaman, who was standing at a little distance from them, trying hard to seem at ease. Passers-by turned to stare at the young giant with his handsome, sunburnt face and well-knit frame.

"Oh—er—allow me to introduce my friend, Mr. Blackstone," said Bunny in his "Society" manner, with elbows raised.

Blackstone lifted his hat and bowed. His face was rather red. Surely a man so well versed in the ways of the world could never be suspected of blushing?

There was a lull in the wind just then, and Miss Woodward held out a hand to her new acquaintance—timidly, as one who is not quite sure of the conventionalities. Blackstone grasped it with rather more of warmth than the occasion warranted, or so it seemed to Bunny.

"Mr. Blackstone was kind enough to walk down here with me," explained the latter, anxious to be rid of so redoubtable a friend. "We are at the same crammer's, you know. Thanks awfully, Blackstone, old chap. It seems a shame to have brought you so far out of your way. You have your work cut out, I'm afraid, if you mean to be back at Sammy's in time for lunch. Good-bye, till this evening."

"Oh, must you really go?" said Millicent, looking up at Blackstone with a shade of regret in her eyes and again holding out the hand, greatly to Bunny's annoyance.

"What a splendid man your friend is!" she exclaimed, as soon as they were alone together.

"Yes, he is a bit big, isn't he?" assented Bunny moodily. "But, I say, where would you like to have lunch?"

Millicent protested.

"Oh, I can't really let you waste your money on me! Will you let me pay half?"

Her hand was wandering to the back of her skirt, in some subtle fold of which her purse lay hidden; but just then a gust of wind swept the street, and the hand was needed elsewhere.

"I say, you know," argued Bunny, "when a fellow asks a lady to go to lunch and the theatre, he always pays for everything. Where shall it be?"

Millicent suggested:

"There's an A. B. C. just round the corner. A glass of milk and a slice of cake—"

"Glass of milk, indeed!" broke in Bunny indignantly. "Call that a lunch? I say, you know, you really mustn't talk like that."

"Oh, very well, then," said Millicent, with a little sigh of resignation. "I leave it to you entirely. But, I warn you, a big lunch will be quite wasted on me, for I'm not one bit hungry."

"Well, then, we'll go to Jimmy's," said Bunny, waving his stick to hail a passing hansom. "The St. James's Restaurant, I mean," he explained, with a touch of condescension. "We men about town always call it 'Jimmy's,' and I forgot that you mightn't understand. Will you get in first, please?"

"Now you must tell me all about your dreadful adventures, and how you got locked up," said she, as they drove through the streets side by side.

Bunny was tempted to seize the little, gloved hand, which lay so lonely and enticing in her lap. But, reflecting that such action on his part might perhaps be a little premature, he clasped his own hands tight across his knee, and began his story. He had got no further than the scene at the German's house when they reached their destination. Bunny paid the cabman three times his proper fare, and they passed into the grill-room.

"What shall we have?" he asked, handing the bill of fare across the table to his guest.

"I hardly know," she said. "There are so many things, and they're all so nice."

At length they agreed to choose mutton cutlets and tomato sauce, with potatoes and green peas, and, while these dainties were in course of preparation, Bunny had time to finish his story.

Millicent made a charming listener. She knew when and how to show her sympathy. How her eyes flashed and her bosom heaved, and what a depth of scorn she put into the word "Coward," when he told of Brown Geegee and the gun! The soft look in her eyes, and the way she had of murmuring "Poor boy!" with an agonised little catch in her breath, when he dwelt upon his sufferings in the cell, were cheap even at that heavy price. But, when he came to tell of his rescue by Blackstone from the police court, and she said "Bravo!" and seemed inclined to give, as he thought, too great credit to the rescuer, there was a little gall in the honey.

"Is that the same gentleman I met to-day?" she asked.

Bunny was forced to say "Yes."

"He looks like it. How jolly it must be for you to have a really nice friend living in the same house!"

"He—he's a bit of a rake, you know—Blackstone is!" said Bunny thoughtfully.

"All men are that, aren't they?"

"That's a bit sweeping, you know!"

"Well, what do you mean by a rake?" she asked.

"He gets drunk now and then, and goes on the 'bust,' and all that sort of thing, you know."

"I don't know," said Millicent, with a charming pout.

"I wish you'd explain. What is a 'bust'?"

At this point the waiter created a diversion by bringing in the cutlets and a new topic of conversation.

“Any wine, sir?”

“Oh, I say, you know, I was forgetting. What will you have to drink?” said Bunny, seizing the wine-list. “Champagne, shall it be?”

“Oh, no, thank you; really, no!” she said earnestly. “I never take anything of the sort. A lemon-squash for me, please!”

“Well, then, I’ll have a bottle of Bass,” said Bunny. “It’s no fun drinking champagne alone,” he added, by way of apology to the waiter.

“I say, you know, I had no idea that you were a teetotaller,” he pursued, when they were left to themselves once more.

“I’m not a teetotaller exactly,” she explained. “I’ve never signed a pledge, I mean, or taken any vows. But I’m not used to wine. We never have anything of the sort at home, for economy’s sake. My brother drinks beer, but I can’t bear the taste of it.”

She made a little grimace expressive of disgust.

The word “economy” left Bunny thoughtful for some time. Was she very poor, he wondered? She was prettily dressed, and she ate and spoke like a lady. If she would only allow him to lend her a pound or two, just to go on with. But perhaps it was not quite so bad as all that. Her brother had his beer, he remembered with relief, and she herself had offered to pay half the luncheon expenses.

“To hear my old governor talk, you know,” he meditated, “anyone would think he was as poor as a rat. Anyway, she shall have a thorough good time with me to-day, if I have to spend my last farthing to give it her.”

Having come to this praiseworthy conclusion, he called for a newspaper, and glanced down the list of matinées. Miss Woodward was fond of music, it seemed; so he decided upon a comic opera, which, the newspaper said, had been performed three hundred consecutive times at the



same theatre ; and which Millicent assured him she would like above all things to hear and see.

So, having sipped their coffee and discharged their bill, they sallied forth once more, and drove in a hansom to the theatre. Millicent was looking at the photographs of actors and actresses, which adorned the walls of the box-office, while Bunny bought the tickets ; so she had no idea to what part of the house they were going. Her astonishment was great when he led her to the stalls.

“Oh, you naughty boy !” she whispered, with delighted eyes. “How wicked of you to deceive me like this. I made sure you would go to the upper circle. It’s a shame to let you waste such a lot of money on me.”

Her hand rested on his arm for a second’s space—just long enough to make him miss it when it was withdrawn.

Bunny was perfectly happy. The performance upon the stage was of no interest to him compared with the girl at his side. She took off her hat before the curtain went up, and her beauty stood the test. That wealth of golden-brown hair drew Bunny’s eyes from the actors, and the music throbbed and beat, rose and fell, seeming to keep time with his heart.

The dainty poise of her head, the soft fulness of her bust as she leaned forward, her eyes that kept looking round at him, to make quite sure that he was enjoying it all as much as she was—all these delights, in the dimness of the darkened theatre, illumined only by the glow from the footlights, sent the warm blood tingling through Bunny’s veins. He forgot everything—home, parents, examination, Blackstone, even himself—for the time being.

Then, in the interval between the acts, how she praised everything, and how she kept thanking Bunny for bringing her to the stalls, where she could hear every word, and see the actresses quite well without opera-glasses ! And how sorry she was for one of the chorus-girls, who walked a little

lame! Bunny wished that life were one long *matinée*, that he might sit in the stalls for ever with Millicent by his side.

But the end came at last. The curtain fell. The lights were turned up. The last notes of the orchestra died away.

Millicent sighed.

"Oh, it has been heavenly," she murmured, clasping her hands and pressing them to her bosom. "How can I ever thank you for the pleasure you have given me?"

"Oh, don't mention it," said Bunny, and then cursed himself for making so commonplace a remark to her, of all people. Having pinned on her hat, she took up her parasol and declared herself ready.

"I'm awfully sorry it's over," said Bunny, when they were out in the street. "I've enjoyed myself immensely. It's so jolly, being with you, you know."

Why could not he say what he wished to say, he wondered? His heart was full of things to say to her—things that any girl would be glad to hear. And there was he talking everyday, prosaic rubbish. If only his heart could have spoken! Words were quite inadequate to express his meaning.

"Now let's look out for somewhere to have tea," he said, elbowing a way through the crush about the doors of the theatre. "I think you'd better take my arm, Millicent, if you don't mind."

The Christian name had slipped from him unawares. He blushed and bit his lip. She clung confidently to his arm, and the throng forced her very close to him.

"Won't you call me Milly?" she said, almost in a whisper; "Millicent is such a mouthful. They all call me Milly at home."

Bunny made instant use of the permission by repeating the name softly, as if he were committing it to memory; and they walked on down the Strand.

The street was flooded with ruddy light from the sunset. Here and there a window sparkled, as it caught the rays, or flashed into molten flame. Every object cast a blue-grey shadow eastward upon pavement and roadway.

"Let's go down to the Embankment," said Millicent softly, "the river must be looking lovely."

"But, I say, you know! How about tea?" protested Bunny.

"I know a nice shop close to Westminster Bridge," she replied coaxingly. "I wouldn't miss the sunset on the river for worlds."

They turned down a narrow by-street in deep shadow and, gaining the river-side, set their faces westward. They walked in silence, until Hungerford Bridge was passed. Then Millicent stopped short.

"Isn't it heavenly?" she exclaimed, with an increased pressure of his arm.

A rich flush—richer for the smoke-wreaths that intervened—suffused the sky, and was reflected in deeper hue down the wide reach of the river. The arches of Westminster Bridge stood out dark and grey amid the glow, as it were a barrier to hold the glory of the heavens above asunder from the glory of the waters beneath. A few long wisps of diaphanous cloud stretched, pink and fleecy, even to the distant east. The clock-tower of the Houses of Parliament rose against the sky like some giant watcher, who had turned his back upon the city to gaze steadfastly into the reddening west. All things, save the busy, irreverent throng of human life, seemed to have turned their faces westward to receive the last kiss of the dying day,

"Isn't it lovely?" said Millicent, looking up into Bunny's face.

"Splendid!" he agreed, with real enthusiasm. He was so glad that she had forgotten to take away her arm. "Now let's have some tea!"

“Why are you in such a hurry?” she asked, with wondering eyes. “Are you so very hungry?”

“No,” said Bunny impudently, “but you are!”

Milly laughed.

“You think you know a lot about my feelings, Mr. Masterful,” she said; “but let me tell you that I could watch a lovely sunset for ever and ever, without once thinking of anything so sordid as tea and bread and butter. So now you know!—Oh, I forgot!”

She hastily withdrew her arm from his, blushing and seeming confused.

“Oh, I say, you know!” pleaded Bunny. “It’s been there so long, and I’ve enjoyed it so much!”

“It has been there far too long,” she said, with cruel decision. “Let’s make haste!”

If Bunny had found the lunch enjoyable, the tea was, to use a pet expression of Millicent’s, “simply heavenly.” They were the only customers in the shop, and the waitress, scenting a love-affair, was discreetly sympathetic, and kept herself in the background.

Drawing off her gloves in a very workmanlike manner, Milly took charge of the tea-pot, while Bunny watched her every movement with keen appreciation.

“It’s much too strong,” she said with a pout, pouring out half a cupful of dark fluid. “We must have some hot water!”

The waitress appeared, as if by magic, from behind a screen, and, in an incredibly short space of time, a jug of hot water was on the table and the tea was diluted to Miss Woodward’s liking.

Bunny might have been drinking nectar, or castor oil, for aught he knew to the contrary. He tasted nothing in the tea, save a faint and, as he fancied, intoxicating flavour of Milly. He asked for a second cup, and yet a third, to keep his enchantress company. Then he picked up her

gloves, which were lying on the table, and, having made sure that the waitress was out of sight, pressed them fervently to his lips.

"Oh, you silly boy," said Millicent, with a nervous laugh. "What *are* you doing with those poor old gloves of mine?"

"I'm kissing them," said Bunny boldly. "They're your gloves, you know! I say, may I keep one of them?"

"Certainly not. It would spoil the pair; and they're still very good gloves. Please give them back to me."

"Not I!" said Bunny, putting them in his pocket. "Perhaps if you're a very good girl, you shall have them back in the course of the evening. But it all depends upon how you behave."

"You are unkind," she said pouting. "I must go home now, if you please! It's getting late."

"Right you are!" Bunny agreed, and he proceeded to pay the bill.

"Now, do give me back my gloves," she said coaxingly, when they were out in the street.

Beyond the glare of the lamps, the old Abbey and the adjacent Houses of Parliament stood out grey and mystic against the sky, where the last faint flush of day still lingered, divided by a belt of pale green from the advancing night.

"I must go home by the underground," said Milly. "Do, please, give me back my gloves!"

"Underground! I should think not!" exclaimed Bunny indignantly. "I can't say good-bye to you like this. It's too sudden, you know. Let me drive you home in a hansom."

"You have spent so much money on me already," she protested, with a show of reluctance.

By way of answer, Bunny called a hansom. He was growing very bold and masterful, alone with this lovely girl

in the glamour of the lighted streets. He was even conscious of some surprise at his own daring, when, Millicent having taken her seat, he gave a random address to the driver and jumped in beside her. The horse started off at a trot towards St. James's Park.

"You remembered the address, didn't you?" she asked, a little anxiously, as she settled herself in her corner.

"That's all right," said Bunny. "Now, about those gloves!"

"Oh, please give them back," she pleaded—"Douglas!"

"That's all right for a beginning," he said. "It's the first time you've called me by my Christian name, you know."

"Isn't that enough, Douglas?"

She laid her hand appealingly upon his sleeve. He seized it at once, and pressed it passionately to his lips.

"Oh, don't, please don't!" she cried, in a frightened tone.

For all answer, Bunny sidled closer to her, and put his arm round her waist.

"It's unfair. It's cruel of you!" she exclaimed, struggling to be free.

"Forgive me," he whispered, bending over her, "I couldn't help it. I love you so. Do try and care for me, just a little."

"I like you very much," she murmured, breathlessly; "but I have seen so little of you."

Bunny pressed his lips to her cheek again and again.

"Milly, darling!" he whispered, "I'm awfully in love with you. I can't bear the thought of leaving you even for a minute. It's love at first sight, that's what it is."

She was very still, but her breath came fast and choking. He could feel her trembling in his arms, and fancied her about to yield.

"Milly, dearest!" he panted, "could you wait for me?"

You're the first girl I've ever loved—upon my honour you are! It'll be a long time, I know. A whole year at the least; but I would work awfully hard for my exam., and—and I feel sure I could do something great in the world, if only you will let me be engaged to you. Will you marry me, Milly?"

By a frantic effort she broke from his arms, and shrank into her own corner, pushing up her veil, as if in need of more air.

The light from a street-lamp fell on her face for a moment. It was deadly pale, and there was a sparkle of tears in her eyes.

"You don't, you can't know what you're saying," she said, in a low tone. "You have only known me one day. You know nothing of my birth or—or character, or anything about me. You're excited, because you're alone with me, and you're a man and I'm a girl, and—and it's all new to you! But you'll repent of your proposal in the morning. No, I can't listen to you. I—I *daren't* listen to you!"

She buried her face in her hands, as if to shut out the alluring prospect of a settled future, a life of leisure, the position of a lady, freedom for ever from the sordid pretence of her home surroundings, which his proposal called up before her mind's eye. The poor fellow was so much in earnest, too. His pleadings affected her strangely. At length she said, in a broken voice:

"What would your parents say to me, as a daughter-in-law, I wonder? I am a lady, I believe, by birth, and I've had a fair education; but I can't pretend to be your equal. I'm a typewriter girl, and you're a gentleman. Let's be friends—we can be nothing more! The difference is too great."

She stretched out her hands, in a gesture at once of despair and entreaty. Bunny, quite beyond himself in the

drunkenness of his first passion, seized the hands roughly and kissed them again and again.

"Oh, you mustn't! It's cruel!" she moaned, striving in vain to be free.

"I don't care what you are," said Bunny; and there was a note of triumph in his voice. "If you were a bare-footed beggar-girl, I should want to marry you just the same! Milly—darling Milly, can't you understand? I love you, dearest!"

He released her hand, and sank back into his own corner of the hansom.

"My people have nothing whatever to do with it. I sha'n't even tell them about it, until next year, when I shall be of age and able to act for myself. I shall come in for a little money then—about three hundred a year. It's not much, I know, but we could manage to exist upon it, couldn't we? Oh, Milly, do say yes!"

"Wherever is he driving us?" she exclaimed, only too glad to postpone her answer, if only for a few seconds. "Why, this is Queen's Road, Bayswater! It's miles out of our way."

"You'll forgive me, won't you?" said Bunny earnestly. "I told him to drive us up here, in order to have more time with you. I wanted to put off the dreadful parting as long as possible. You're not angry with me, are you, dearest?"

"It was very wrong of you," she said wearily. "Do please tell him to drive home at once—there's a good boy."

Bunny pushed up the little lid with his walking-stick and shouted to the driver, who turned his horse's head immediately.

"Do say yes, darling!" he said coaxingly.

Milly was schooling herself to refusal, trying hard to keep her companion's rabbit mouth—his objectionable feature—in the foreground of her mind. But the image of Percy



kept pushing its way to the front, with Harry Jones in perspective, and his remembered insults rang in her ears. She felt faint, and longed to be at home, to have a good cry in her own little bedroom.

“Milly, dearest! you will ruin my whole life if you refuse!” pleaded Bunny.

Suddenly a thought occurred to her. What a triumph it would be to take Douglas home with her and introduce him to Percy as her betrothed. The thought was unworthy of her, she was aware at the time, but somehow it took possession of her brain to the exclusion of every worthier thought.

“Don’t make me wretched for life!” whispered Bunny passionately. “Let me take care of you, and protect you, and love you for ever!”

Almost unconsciously her lips whispered assent; and, the next moment she was hugged close to Bunny’s manly bosom, and ran some risk of being smothered with kisses.

## CHAPTER VIII.

CONTAINING SOME ACCOUNT OF THE MEETING OF AN AUGUST ASSEMBLY, WITH CURIOUS INFORMATION CONCERNING ITS RULES, AND THE CONFUSION INTO WHICH IT WAS THROWN BY THE ENTRANCE OF MR. LEE-STRETTON.

THANKS to the reverent efforts of the maid-of-all-work, the dining-room of the little house in St. Christopher Avenue looked wonderfully neat and comfortable, that memorable Saturday evening. Percy surveyed it with approval, as he stood before the fire-place awaiting the arrival of his guests and colleagues. The highly-polished surface of a mahogany sideboard gleamed in the gaslight, and the mirror above reflected, with lively realism, the images of a dozen bottles of beer, divers tumblers, and a biscuit tin. Unsullied white curtains veiled the recess of the bow-window, and the little writing-table in the corner was a picture of neatness and order.

Percy glanced up at an engraving which hung above the mantelpiece. It represented the death of Nelson, and the Prime Minister intended to refer to it in his speech that evening with patriotic effect. An extra leaf had been added to the dining-table for the occasion. Every arm-chair in the house had been brought into requisition, and the sofa had been dragged forward to supplement the accommodation. Still four or five of the members would have to put up with the comparative discomfort of ordinary, straight-backed chairs, and Percy's mind was troubled to apportion

the various seats, in order of comfort, without causing ill-feeling among his friends.

"Members of the government take precedence of course," he mused aloud, with puckered brow. "As Prime Minister, I sit in mother's big invalid chair, and the Foreign Secretary will have the wicker one on my right, the Home Secretary on my left, and so forth. The whips can sit together on the sofa. Teddy Hunt's an easy-going little chap. He won't mind having a common chair; and of course the new members must take what's given them, whether they like it or not."

A knock at the front door put an abrupt end to his reverie.

"I wish Jane had put the beer on the table in the window, behind the curtain!" he muttered. "I hate anything like ostentation. However, it can't be helped now."

The first arrival was Harry Jones, the Right Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs, Percy's dearest friend. He was decked out for the occasion in a frock-coat, a fawn waistcoat with dark-blue spots, trousers of a garish pattern, and a pink carnation at his button-hole. His hair, of a pale mud-colour, parted accurately in the middle, was smug and sleek from a liberal use of pomatum, and his moustache, a matter of a few irresponsible hairs, had been twisted to a bristle on either cheek. In one hand he held a golf cap—a head-dress, which assorted ill with the frock-coat and fawn waistcoat; in the other he carried a bunch of narcissus, whose fragrance, struggling and finally blending with the atmosphere of cheap scent, in which Mr. Jones moved, was truly overpowering. His small grey eyes looked out sheepishly from under their sandy brows. His mouth was coarse, and the turn of the lips suggested an African negro.

"Well, 'ow goes it, Perce, old man?" he ejaculated, laying the bunch of narcissus upon the table, and holding out a fat hand to be shaken. "I ventured to bring round

these few blossoms, 'opin' that Miss Milly might do me the favour of acceptin' 'em."

Percy shook the proffered hand cordially.

"She hasn't come home yet," he said. "But I'll tell the slavey to give her your present the minute she arrives. It's awfully good of you, old man, especially after the way she's treated you. I'm afraid she isn't worthy of you."

"No, don't say that!" Mr. Jones protested. "But you might let 'er know—accidentally, as it were—that there's lots of girls I could 'ave for the askin'; but that I'd rather 'ave 'er—yes, if I 'ad to wait two years for 'er—than any one of 'em."

"I will, dear boy, I will!" said Percy fervently, slapping his chum on the back. "You're a regular brick, Harry, if ever there was one! I'll ring for the slavey, and tell her to give the flowers to Mil, as soon as ever she comes in."

"Well, Perce, I 'ave an idea, and if it's too bold and presumin', tell me so, dear boy!" murmured Harry Jones, with heightened colour. "Would you very much mind my tellin' the slavey to put these blossoms in a vauze on Miss Woodward's dressin'-table?"

"I'd like them to be in 'er bedroom," he continued, with a genuine blush—"that shrine of innocence and bower of bliss, as I call it in my 'eart. If my desires are too bold, dear boy, tell me so!"

"Ah, you're a sad dog, Harry!" said Percy, giving his companion a friendly dig in the waistcoat. "If it was anybody else, I'd kill him for asking what you've asked. But, as it's you, dear boy, knowing you for a man of honour, and hoping one day to call you brother-in-law, I'll just ring the bell for the slavey, and you shall give the directions yourself."

Then there came a loud double knock at the front door, and, a minute later, three more of the members entered the dining room. Harry Jones snatched up the flowers and rushed

out into the passage, whence, after a whispered colloquy with the maid-of-all-work, he reappeared, blushing and empty-handed.

After that, knocks at the front door came thick and fast, and the bell was in constant agitation ; until, by a quarter past eight, the tale of the members—fourteen in all—was complete. They were chiefly junior clerks from small branch banks in the neighbourhood, but there were also an articled clerk from the office of a local solicitor, a shopwalker—the most gentlemanlike man in company—and two nondescript youths of sporting proclivities, who went by the names of Elf and Bert respectively. (Elf is, as everyone knows, the abbreviated form of Elfrid, which is the polite way of pronouncing the common name, Alfred.) Harry Jones, esquire, was, in every-day life, a commercial traveller in the bedstead line, enjoying private means to the amount of one hundred pounds per annum, in addition to his salary.

When, with some trouble but without any serious bickering, the various seats had been allotted, Percy opened the proceedings with a short speech, in the course of which he touched upon every topic of public interest—capital and labour, the strike of the moment, the latest murder, the situation in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America—ending up with an apt quotation from a comic song then in vogue. The conclusion of this harangue was hailed with loud cheers and a mighty thumping of fists upon the table. Cries of “Hear, hear!” came from all sides, until one of the sportive youths—Elf, to be particular—took advantage of a moment’s lull to vociferate “Beer, beer!” at once a humorous sally and a delicate hint to their host that the company would not refuse the offer of a little light refreshment.

Percy adjourned to the sideboard, Harry Jones following as assistant ; and, after a brief interval of the popping of

corks and the buzz of general conversation, each member had a glass of the frothing beverage before him. Then, the Prime Minister and his henchman returned to their arm-chairs.

"Here's luck to you, old man!" said Elf, standing up and raising his glass to his lips in Percy's honour.

"Order, order!" cried Harry Jones severely. "No unparliamentary language, if—you—please!"

"Then, here's to the very good health of the Right Honourable the Prime Minister!" said Bert, rising to his friend's rescue.

Percy rose in his turn, and lifted his glass.

"I thank you all," he said, "for the kind sentiments towards me, which my honourable friend, Mr. Bert, has expressed in such flattering terms. My feelings, gentlemen, upon this occasion, are more than I can express"—cries of "No, no!"—"yes, I repeat it"—looking round with moist eyes—"more than I can express. I am proud to receive the assurance of your esteem. I deem it no small honour to be thus esteemed by the fourteen honourable English gentlemen I have the pleasure to see before me. English gentlemen! What memories the words call up! Memories, I think I may say, of the glorious Past—England's glorious Past! What was Shakespeare? An English gentleman. What was Marlborough? An English gentleman. What was Pitt? An English gentleman. What was the dying hero"—he struck the table a sounding blow with his fist—"whose portrait you may see above yon mantel-shelf—if you will kindly turn your eyes that way? What was the valiant hero of Trafalgar, I ask?—the great, the glorious Nelson, expiring on board the *Victory*, with the words 'England expects' upon his lips? What was he, I ask you? An English gentleman!" (Deafening cheers, and much thumping of glasses upon the table.) "English gentlemen, I am proud of your esteem. I thank you all,

and venture to quaff this foaming bowl—if I may be allowed the expression—to your very good healths.”

When the applause, which greeted the end of this speech, had somewhat subsided, the Minister for Foreign Affairs stood up, and proceeded to give an account of his policy during the past week.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “’Er Majesty’s Government’s been much annoyed lately by the conduct of a certain nation in Africa, ’oom it is my solemn duty to declare to be nothin’ better than a lot of bloomin’ scoundrels”—cries of “Order, order!”—“though, of course, I name no names (“No, no!”). “Also, there’s been trouble on the Continent, owin’ to the be’aviour of a certain Eastern potentate, ’oo, I feel it my duty to say, ’as not be’aved at all ’andsomely.” (Cries of “What can you expect?” and “Keep your ’air on.”) “Also, a certain nation across the Atlantic—I name no names—would be lots better if someone ’d make ’em see a few stars and feel a few stripes”—

At this point a violent uproar arose, compelling Mr. Jones to resume his seat. Half of the members cried “Shame!” and the other half raised their voices in the cause of order. The Prime Minister stood up and, with an appealing glance, called for silence. Then a little man, at the far end of the table, rose and stated that, having a cousin in America, he was not going to sit still and listen to that sort of thing, not from anybody, he didn’t care who.

“But the Right Honourable gentleman said most emphatically that he named no names,” pleaded Percy, in great distress.

The little man insisted :

“He talked about the stars and stripes, and if that isn’t namin’ names, I should like to know what is!”

The opinion of the meeting was divided, and, as each member thought fit to support his own views with the full force of his lungs, a boisterous scene ensued. Percy was

in despair. All the bonds of sympathy and friendship drew him to take part with the Foreign Secretary. But he was also Premier of that august assembly, and therefore bound to see fair play between the disputants.

"We'll put it to the vote," he cried, at length; "we'll have a ballot."

He hastened to provide a slip of paper for each member, to be filled up "aye" or "no" according to the voter's private judgement. He then took Harry Jones' golf-cap from the sideboard and gathered in the papers, his own last of all.

There was dead silence in the room while the votes were being counted. Then Percy rose with a puzzled expression of face.

"It's a draw," he announced, "so we must consider both parties in the right."

But neither the Foreign Secretary nor the little man who had a cousin in America were content with this decision.

"We must 'ave in some impartial person to give a casting vote," said Harry Jones.

"I'm agreeable," replied the little man defiantly, strong in the justice of his cause. "I'll abide by the decision."

"I'll ring for the slavey," said Percy, greatly relieved. "She's impartial enough, in all conscience."

"Rule!" cried Elf suddenly, replenishing his glass on his own responsibility.

"Rule!" echoed Bert, and the cry was taken up all round the table.

"What do you mean by callin' out rule?" roared Harry Jones. "I'll rule you."

Elf started to his feet.

"I beg to call the attention of the Right Honourable Prime Minister to Rule 55 of the Society upon the subject of arbitration," he said, and sat down again as suddenly as he had risen.



“Oh, blow rules!’ bellowed the Foreign Secretary.  
“Ring the bell, Perce, the slavey ’ll do first-rate.”

Elf passed up a manuscript copy of the Society’s regulations for the Prime Minister to read, and the uproar broke out afresh.

After a brief study of the document, Percy rose and enjoined silence. The clamour sinking to a few stray murmurs, he was able to make himself heard.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “it is with the deepest grief and—may I add—consternation, that I have witnessed this disorderly scene. If my right honourable friend and colleague did, in a moment of heat, make use of expressions—or, shall I say, flowers of speech” (Cries of “No, no,” and ‘Hear, hear,’)—which gave offence to an honourable gentleman here present, I am sure that no offence was intended, and that my right honourable friend will be most willing to withdraw those expressions.”

“No, he won’t,” broke in Harry Jones. “Stow it, Perce, and ring for the slavey.”

“As my right honourable friend is obdurate,” pursued the Premier, his ardour somewhat damped by the interruption, “I shall proceed to read to you Rule 55 of this Society, to which my honourable friend has had the goodness to call my attention.”

(Loud cries of “Hear, hear,” from the sofa where Elf and Bert were seated.)

Percy took up the manuscript and read:

“In case of a difference of opinion between gents of the Society, the matter shall be put to the ballot. If, in the ballot, an equal number of votes be recorded on both sides, the Society thinks it best, under the circs., to submit the question to arbitration. (Hear, hear.) In such a case, the youngest gent in the company shall leave the house and pass into the streets. He shall accost the first man—be he

beggar or prince—whom he meets, and shall request him courteously to act as referee in the dispute. The first man who complies with the request shall be considered as arbitrator, and gents will kindly accept his decision as absolutely final. The person of the referee shall be sacred. Any violence offered to him will be punished by the expulsion from the Society of the gent or gents concerned in the assault.

“By order,

“PERCY WOODWARD,

“HARRY JONES.”

The Prime Minister sat down amid thunderous applause.

“It’s our own rule, Harry,” he whispered in his neighbour’s ear, “we can’t very well go against it.”

After some discussion, Elf, as the youngest member present, was sent out into the street to seek a referee, and there was a general filling and lighting of pipes throughout the assembly. Every man settled down comfortably in his chair, anticipating what is vulgarly called a “lark.”

A few minutes later there came a rattling at the letter-box, and the door was opened by a member stationed in the passage for that purpose.

“There’s three of ’em,” said Bert, in a stage whisper, as he peeped into the hall. “Suppose the two referees take different sides, what then—eh, Perce?”

The Prime Minister had no time to consider this harassing possibility before Elf made his appearance, ushering in two men—foreigners, to judge by their hair, which was long and unkempt, suggesting music.

“I beg to call the attention of Parliament to two German gentlemen—Mr. Weissmann and Mr. Fritz,” said the youngest member, with an introductory wave of his hand towards the strangers.

“Hear, hear!” cried Bert enthusiastically.

Rising from their arm-chairs, the Prime Minister and Harry Jones begged the foreigners to be seated. Percy was preparing to lay the situation before them in a few well-chosen words - he always prided himself upon his choice of words—when the shop-walker, who had not spoken hitherto, rose suddenly, protesting that the rule allowed of but one arbitrator. He begged to suggest that the introduction of a second was a dastardly blow at the constitution of their great and glorious country, and at the most cherished liberties of every British subject.

This speech provoking loud applause, the Prime Minister was about to ask one of the strangers to withdraw, when the stouter of the two rose from his chair.

“Do not trouble yourselves, I beg,” he said. “Fritz and I have only one mind between de two. Nicht wahr, Fritz?”

Fritz grinned, and his friend continued:

“If some gentleman vill be so kind to explain vat is de matter, I vill kvickly decide.”

Percy was beginning to expound the state of the case in his best oratorical manner, but he was interrupted by cries of “Chuck it, Perce!” “Stow poetry, dear boy!” and the like. The meeting again bade fair to become uproarious.

It was in the midst of this din, when Percy was standing on the hearth-rug, his hands raised in entreaty, calling distractedly for silence, that the door opened and his sister entered, followed by a young dandy of the type which the Prime Minister most abhorred. He stood, as it were, frozen to the floor, his eyes starting from his head, his hair bristling with dismay, like one who sees a ghost or other gruesome sight. The eyes of the other members followed his, and dead silence fell upon the meeting.

Milly's face was expressive of intense disgust. Her pretty nose sniffed disdainfully as it encountered the

mingled fumes of beer and tobacco. Poor Bunny, her companion, was greatly disconcerted. The sudden change from the quiet street, love, and undiluted Milly to this crowded room, with its pungent atmosphere, had robbed him of all presence of mind. His betrothed, though scarcely less surprised than he at the scene before them, was happily in full command of her faculties.

"I wish you and your friends would have the goodness to remember that this is not a public-house, Percy," she said haughtily. "You are frightening the whole street with your shouting and noise. It's disgraceful!"

All the members hung their heads and seemed abashed, especially Harry Jones, the Right Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs.

"I shall tell Jane to light the gas in the drawing-room," she continued; "and I want you to come up in a few minutes, Percy. I wish you to make the acquaintance of my *fiancé*, Mr. Lee-Stretton."

"Your *fiancé*?" gasped Percy, with vacant eyes.

"She's engaged to another! Oh, faithless fair! Let me get at him!" shrieked Harry Jones; and, slipping off his coat, he made a rush for Bunny.

But Elf and Bert, with laudable presence of mind, flung themselves upon him and held him fast, stroking him soothingly and emitting a hissing sound from between their closed teeth, as if the Foreign Secretary had been a restive horse, and they his grooms.

Percy, having recovered from the first shock of his surprise, and finding no reasonable cause of quarrel with Mr. Lee-Stretton, stepped forward to shake the hand of his future brother-in-law.

But Bunny gave no heed to his friendly advances. Glancing round the room, his eyes had encountered the faces of the two Germans, and all his old suspicions of Millicent revived. The thieves, for their part, had also

recognised their former victim, and their faces were ashy with terror.

“Look!” he whispered, clutching at his fair companion’s arm. “There they are!—the Germans!—who robbed me, you know!”

Millicent took in the position at a glance. Her face aglow with shame and anger, she turned to Percy.

“What are those persons doing here?” she asked, pointing to the foreigners, who were doing their best to slip under the table.

“They are the referees, Mil,” said Percy, assuming an air of importance. “See Rule 55!”

“Nonsense!” she exclaimed fiercely. “They are robbers. They robbed Mr. Lee-Stretton only the night before last. Lock and guard the door, while I go for a policeman.”

“Rule! Rule!” cried Harry Jones, still struggling, coatless, in the grasp of his captors, with a vindictive glance at his rival. “Remember what the rule says! No violence to the referee! I’m jolly glad they did rob him. Well done they, say I!”

“Hear, hear! Rule!” came from all parts of the room.

The Germans reappeared from under the table, and, by pathetic gestures, commended themselves to the protection of the company.

“Oh, bother your rules!” cried Milly, her eyes flashing with indignation, so that Harry Jones cowered under the look she gave him. “This is a question of the laws of England, and you quote your miserable rule!”

“Shame! A free passage for the referees!” cried Harry Jones, relieved for a moment from the onus of her glance. “Never fear, you foreign chaps! I’ll see you safe home, and give you supper into the bargain.”

Milly stamped her foot, and angry tears filled her eyes.

“I say, you know,” Bunny whispered in her ear, “we’ve done our best. It’s no use making a row.”

“How silly men are!” she said, clenching her little fists. “All this Debating Society is only play and make-believe. And yet they set up their twopenny-halfpenny rule against justice and everything else. I declare they are going to escort those villains to the front door, and Mr. Jones is shaking hands with them. It’s too much. Let’s come upstairs to the drawing-room. I can’t bear to see such folly!”

She hurried from the room, Bunny following, to avoid seeing the actual escape of the criminals so nearly captured.

“It’s a shame and a disgrace,” she said, when Percy, having prorogued Parliament, joined the loving couple in the drawing-room.

“I’m sorry that it should have occurred to-night of all nights in the year,” said the Prime Minister apologetically. “It will give Mr. Lee-Stretton a bad impression of his new relations-in-law, I fear. But, you know, sir,” he added, turning to Bunny, “rules must be enforced, and strictly, too, or where’s the good of having them at all?”

“Certainly,” said Bunny, temporising. “But, I say, don’t you think it was going a bit too far to let those scoundrels off? I had an awfully bad time of it all through them. They took a diamond ring of mine, and all my clothes, and gave me some beastly rags in exchange.”

“A diamond ring, did you say?” asked Percy, with wide-open eyes. “By gum, though, that’s bad! I had no idea the affair was so serious, or I should have had them arrested, rule or no rule!”

Millicent’s betrothed went up many degrees in his estimation. Here was a man more desirable even than Harry Jones. He thought how he would boast to his colleagues at the bank of “my brother-in-law that is to be—a man who can afford to lose a valuable diamond ring, and think no more of it than you or I would of losing sixpence, and such a dashing chap, too!” His heart warmed at the

thought, and he did his utmost to make himself agreeable to Mr. Lee-Stretton during the rest of that young gentleman's visit—an attention far from welcome to the recipient, who would rather have been left alone with his beloved Milly.

## CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH MR. BLACKSTONE SHOWS A TASTE FOR LOW COMEDY AND A HANKERING AFTER MISS WOODWARD, WHICH CAUSE MR. LEE-STRETTON MUCH UNEASINESS.

IT has been remarked that youth is a fever, and assuredly the delirium of first love may be regarded as the crisis or turning-point of the malady for better or worse. But, even when his temperature is highest, the patient is sometimes vouchsafed a lucid interval, when, for a brief space, he reviews his behaviour in the pitiless light of common sense. At such a time he is apt to smite his breast, crying, "What a fool I have been! What an ass I have made of myself!" This is the season of good resolutions, when the sufferer vows to keep close watch over himself in future, to avoid this or that pitfall, to keep his susceptibility well in hand. He thinks of writing to bid farewell to the cause of all his woe—a tender note breathing soft melancholy and regret from every line. Yet the touch of her hand and the subtle perfume of her thick-coiled hair were passing sweet that night under the stars. He cannot part with her thus lightly, and he straightway lapses once more into sweet delirium, leaving common sense, the marplot, to the tender mercies of oblivion.

Six days after the events related in the last chapter Bunny was enduring one of these lucid intervals. It was a Friday afternoon, dull and rainy. Pleading a bad headache, he had escaped early from the class-room, and was sitting, pipe in mouth, at his bedroom window, looking out over



the wet roofs. Never had the outlook seemed so dreary ; never had he been so despondent. He had seen his enchantress four times since the memorable Saturday of their engagement. He had been introduced to her mother, who had received him graciously. Millicent was undoubtedly the sweetest girl in all the world. He was madly in love with her ; but there was one drawback.

Bunny would have liked to write and tell his mother of the engagement. She would like Millicent, he felt sure. But then she and his father would come up to London to call on the Woodwards, and the vulgarity of that brother of hers would be sure to disgust them with the whole family. He dared not run the risk.

It was very disheartening. His eyes fixed themselves upon the chimney-stack of the house opposite, seen dimly athwart the rain. But the constant downpour had given a tear-stained expression to the sooty chimney-pots, and there was small consolation to be found in that quarter.

“I’ll explain it all to her to-morrow,” he thought, “and ask her to keep her engagement a secret until I’m of age. Her brother may die before then, or a thousand things may happen !”

At this point in his musing, the door opened and Blackstone entered the room.

“Well, youngster, how’s the headache?” he asked, taking his seat upon the bed.

“Oh, it’s still rather bad, you know !” murmured the invalid.

“Headache or no headache, you’re a lucky dog !” said Blackstone, taking a pipe from his pocket. “I shouldn’t mind being in your shoes !”

Bunny seemed relieved. He rose and leaned against the iron railing at the foot of the bed.

“She is a nice girl, isn’t she ?” he said. “I say, Blackstone, she’s quite presentable, you know. My people

couldn't possibly object to her, could they? She's a perfect lady!"

"You needn't tell them about it till you're safely fixed up in the matrimonial line," was the reply. "They'll kick up a bit of a shindy at first, of course. You must expect that. But they'll get over it."

"But I say, I've been thinking a lot about that brother of hers. He's an awful bounder! It'll be bad enough for me to have a chap like that for a brother-in-law; but my people will object to him pretty strongly, you know!"

"Ah, pretty girls are apt to have brothers," said Blackstone drily. "It's an awful nuisance, but it's not altogether the girl's fault, if you come to think of it."

There was silence between them for some minutes.

"What are you going to do about those Germans?" Blackstone asked at length. "We might get some fun out of them—wring their necks, or something of that sort. I'm willing to help."

"I don't see that we can do anything," said Bunny thoughtfully. "I told the police all I knew about them, but they didn't seem to believe me."

"Oh, hang the police," said Blackstone. "I vote we do it by ourselves. We might dress Geegee up as an old woman or a slavey, or something of that sort, and let him hang about their neighbourhood."

"But I say, you know," Bunny protested, "I can't see that you need have any comic business at all. Geegee's dead sure to make an ass of himself."

"You know nothing whatever about it, youngster. I tell you that somebody must disguise himself, if you mean to catch these chaps, and why not Geegee? It's always done. Go out into the street and ask the first bobby you come across, if you don't believe me."

Bunny strode restlessly up and down the room, in great perturbation of spirit.

"We shall get in an awful row if we're found out," he murmured. "A fellow got penal servitude only the other day for taking the law into his own hands."

"We sha'n't be found out," said Blackstone; "and, if we are, I'll take all the blame upon myself."

"Very well, then, I leave it all to you," said Bunny, with a gesture of impatience; "but I don't see why you should be so keen on it."

"I'll go and fetch Geegee," said Blackstone, rising, "and we'll hold a council of war."

"But why have Geegee in it at all?" cried Bunny. "He's mad, and can be of no earthly use. He's sure to make an ass of himself."

His protest was wasted upon the empty twilight of the bedroom, for Blackstone, with his usual impetuosity, was already thundering down the stairs. Although he regarded the militiaman, in the abstract, as the best of good fellows, a concrete Blackstone, taking over the direction of his (Bunny's) affairs, was hardly to his liking. And besides, there was Milly. Blackstone, hanging about Hammersmith in quest of the Germans, might find or make many opportunities for meeting and speaking with Miss Woodward. If only he could be persuaded to disguise himself, as well as Brown Geegee, all would be well. But alas, there was no hope of any such thing.

Bunny's musings were cut short by the reappearance of Blackstone, who pushed Brown Geegee before him into the room.

"Sit down on the floor, Geegee, old chap. Make yourself at home, you heathen idol," he said, forcing his victim to comply. "Now, Bunny, light a candle. We can't discuss the question properly in the dark. Now, the first thing to be done," he continued, "is to find out where these Germans live. You couldn't find the house again, I suppose—eh, young 'un?"

"I'm afraid not; but, I say, why not try the restaurant?"

"Because they'll give that particular spot a wide berth, after their narrow escape of last Saturday. How they must bless that Debating Society."

"But we can do nothing, you know!" exclaimed Bunny.

"You're wrong," said Blackstone, puffing away at his pipe. "We'll have 'em yet, won't we, Geegee?"

"Rather!" said Geegee, with gleaming teeth and eyes twinkling with cunning. It was the first time, for many days, that Blackstone had spoken to him as an equal. "We will catch them very soon, and then—" Brown Geegee threw back his head, drew his hand significantly across his throat, rolled his eyes, and grinned more horribly than ever.

"No, Geegee, old boy; not quite so bad as that!" said Blackstone, regarding the antics of the coloured gentleman, much as a trainer might watch the tricks of his performing monkey. "But we'll make them sing small. You must help me to find them, and I'll see to the thrashing."

"Blackstone, you are my very good friend," said the coloured gentleman, and his face puckered into a perfectly fiendish expression of benevolence. "I will find the black-satan villains, and I will help you to slay them. Now, please, let me return to my studies."

"Sit still a bit, Geegee. I haven't quite done with you yet."

"To begin with," pursued Blackstone, fixing his eyes upon Bunny's bewildered face, "I must have an interview with Miss Woodward."

"But I say, you know!" cried Bunny. "Surely, that won't be necessary! I can't allow it, Blackstone! It's not proper! It's unfair to the girl! It's—"

"You needn't lose your temper over it," said Blackstone, with a chuckle. "You can be there, all the time. Only I must find out what she knows about the Germans."

"She knows nothing whatever about them," said Bunny hastily. "She has only seen them once or twice at the Italian restaurant I told you of."

"That's just it ; I want her to find out from the people at the restaurant where it is that these Germans live. They'd be less likely to smell a rat if she asked, than if one of us were to go making inquiries."

"Oh, I'll ask her to do that, if you like. That's quite easy."

"What a jealous chap you are," said Blackstone, sitting up. "What harm could it do you if I were to ask the girl a few questions in your presence ?"

"Oh, of course not, I didn't understand !" murmured Bunny, confused and a little ashamed. "I'm going to meet her to-morrow. You can come to lunch, if you like !"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he wished them back again. He would have given pounds to recall the invitation ; but Blackstone's prompt acceptance gave him no time to invent an excuse.

"I think I shall come too," said Brown Geegee complacently, from his seat upon the floor.

"No, no, hang it all, it's too much !" exclaimed Bunny angrily. "I don't mind you, Blackstone, just for this once ; but I'm blowed if I'm going to have Geegee."

"He might be rather useful," said Blackstone, stroking his moustache thoughtfully. "But, of course, if you don't want him, there's an end of the matter. It's your lunch, you know !"

"Bunny is not at all a polite man," said the coloured gentleman, in an injured tone. "If he had a bit of gratitude in his body, he would say to himself : 'I will not forget the friendly fellow, who saved me so heroically from the deadly-satan police magistrate. I will ask the friendly fellow to join me at lunch. I will introduce him to my lady-friend.' But there is no politeness in him."

Bunny paused in his agitated prow, to slap the shoulder of his dusky friend apologetically.

"Look here, Geegee, old chap," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. But, you see, I'm awfully gone on Miss Woodward, and I want to be alone with her as much as possible. You wouldn't like it, you know, if I were to stroll into your harem over in India, just when you were having a chat with your favourite wife. You'd get in a rage, and kick up an awful shindy. I feel the same way about Miss Woodward. You understand, don't you, old chap?"

"Yes, I understand," said Brown Geegee, with a frightful leer. "But I ask you to remember that I am your honourable friend. Moreover, I would not, on any account, flirt with the lovely lady."

"Shut up, Geegee," said Blackstone. "Bunny has made up his mind not to have you to lunch, so there's an end of it. After I've had a talk with Miss Woodward, I shall come back here, and we'll set out together to catch these Germans. You won't mind dressing up, will you, old chap? You'll make a lovely ayah, and we can get a big doll for you to carry."

"No, I will not be a dirty-vulgar ayah-woman," screamed Brown Geegee, with a formidable display of teeth. "I will disguise myself as an English lord. I will wear a very high collar, and my red tie and my long overcoat, and my top-hat, and my boots of patent-leather. I will suck the ivory handle of my cane, and I will say 'Haw, haw!' when anybody speaks to me."

Rising suddenly from the bed, Blackstone dealt the coloured gentleman a mighty blow on the chest, which, squatting as he was, laid him sprawling on his back.

"It's a grand idea!" he shouted. "We'll put a false nose on you, Geegee, and you'll do splendidly."

"I will have no false noses," gasped the coloured gentle-

man, sitting up and passing his hand over his chest to make sure that no bones were broken. "And, Blackstone, I ask you to remember that, though you are my very good friend, and I love you, even little horrid filth-worms will turn, as the English proverb expresses. Moreover, if you assault me once again, I shall be very angry with you, and call for the police."

"I'm sorry, old chap," said Blackstone, causing his dusky friend to writhe under a well-directed slap on the back. "We'll say no more about false noses or ayahs. You shall arrange your own disguise."

"Very good. I accept your apology with many thanks," said Brown Geegee, his injured feelings somewhat assuaged. "Now, with your permission, I will return to my own apartment and resume my studies."

"All right, Geegee. Get along with you," said Blackstone.

"Well, that's settled," he continued, when the coloured gentleman had taken his polite leave. "I think I'll go down now and talk to Sammy a bit. He likes me to ask him questions about my exam. It makes him think I'm a hard-working chap."

So Bunny was left alone once more.

It is a notorious fact that all true lovers are of a retiring disposition. The shyness and diffidence of this particular member of the species were a hackneyed subject of jest among his intimates. And yet a careless Fate was spinning the thread of his destiny so clumsily that it threatened to become entangled with the threads of his neighbours. He felt much like a man who has been kissing and hugging his lady-love in a secluded place upon a common, the seashore, or elsewhere, the bright eye of heaven his only witness, and who is suddenly aware that there is a school-treat going on close at hand, that his endearments are the subject of human, or rather impish, ridicule and comment.

But Blackstone had promised to return home directly after lunch—that was one consolation. He would thus have all the afternoon and part of the evening alone with his beloved, and he was resolved to say all that he could in that time to prejudice Milly's mind against the militiaman. Blackstone's good name was not worth much, and it seemed best to Bunny that his friend's character should be placed before Millicent in its very worst light.

He was silent and absent-minded at dinner that night, and he drank so copiously of the claret—ten and sixpence a dozen, and the very best at the price—which Sammy or his wife provided for the pupils' consumption, that the little old tutor felt bound to lean across the table and warn him against the dangers of "chronic alcoholism." And when, at an hour somewhat earlier than usual, he betook himself to bed, his wakeful thoughts conjured up all manner of dire possibilities. But sleep lurked in ambush among the small hours of the morning, and Bunny was at length taken a prisoner into dreamland.



## CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH MR. BLACKSTONE'S CHARACTER IS BRIEFLY DISPLAYED, WITH THE ACCOUNT OF A LUNCHEON-PARTY AND A TRIP TO KEW GARDENS.

BUNNY'S fears, though not altogether groundless, were at least disproportioned to the event. Blackstone in the society of his fellow-pupils was a very different person to Blackstone in the presence of a pretty and innocent girl. Deprived of his mother at an early age, he had no sisters, and his father—a red-faced, hard-riding baronet, who only emerged from his country-seat for a few days at the time of the Derby—had been for years past tabooed by the ladies of his county because of his habit of swearing.

Arthur Blackstone had grown up to regard women as a topic of conversation to alternate with horses and dogs. During his three years at Harrow he heard much talk about them, and committed to memory some two dozen choice anecdotes concerning the sex, which, in after years, gained for him the name of an after-dinner wit among the officers of his county militia.

Cast adrift among the dissipations of London, he would certainly have gone straight to the dogs had not the dogs themselves intervened to save him. A bull-dog and a fox-terrier had accompanied him on his first arrival at Sammy's, and had taken up their abode in the class-room, to the delight of the pupils and the annoyance of their instructors. For three days the unwelcome guests were inmates of Mr. Thompson's house. Then, a friendly publican having been

sounded upon the subject, they were removed to the backyard of the Crown and Anchor Inn close by. During his first three years as a crammer's pupil, the bull-dog and fox-terrier had been his constant companions; and somehow, between them, they managed to steer him clear of the more degrading forms of vice.

Occasionally, it is true, he would break loose and go, to use his own expression, "upon the bust." But he felt so ashamed the next morning, that he dared not look the bull-dog in the face, and his apologies to the little, bright-eyed terrier were quite pathetic in their intensity. At such times his memory would fly back to Harrow, and half-forgotten precepts would flit through his brain—faint echoes of that simplest, noblest preacher, whose voice, ringing like a trumpet-call through the darkened chapel, had raised a spark of Sir Galahad in the breast even of Arthur Blackstone. At such times he was conscious of a vocation for the Church. He would be a missionary, a martyr—something ecstatic! But after breakfast, and divers copious draughts of soda-water, with perhaps the slenderest hair of the dog that had so badly bitten him overnight, all idea of the Church was at an end. He would work hard, pass his exam., and then die, like the heroes of Rorke's Drift, defending the colours of England. By lunch-time he had become slightly tired of work, and Rorke's Drift had lost some of its charms. By five o'clock he was the same happy-go-lucky giant as ever, and the lapse of the previous night was no longer a weight upon his conscience. Still, thanks to the loving-kindness of the bull-dog and the fox-terrier, he had no wish to repeat the experiment for many a long day.

But there came a time when he was robbed of their society. The muzzling order burst like a thunder-bolt upon the canine world; and Arthur Blackstone, whose love for his pets was quite unselfish, after one or two bootless

arguments with policemen of the neighbourhood, tied a label to the neck of each, and led them to Paddington Station. There he confided them, whining and whimpering most pitifully, to the charge of a burly guard, with orders to hand them over to Sir Nicholas Blackstone's groom at the station nearest to his father's country-seat.

"I suppose you don't happen to have such a thing as a rat or a badger in the van?" he asked of the railway official, in a tremulous voice.

"No, sir, that I haven't," said the guard, with a grin.

"Oh, it doesn't much matter," said Blackstone, gulping down a lump in his throat and trying to look unconcerned. "I only thought, if you did happen to have such a thing about you, it'd amuse the little 'un on the way down. It'll be a bit dull for them," he added apologetically. "They can't read newspapers, you see, or anything of that sort. Perhaps you wouldn't mind letting the terrier worry your hand now and then? It'd make the time pass quicker for the poor little beggar. Good day."

"Good day and thank you, sir," said the guard, pocketing a small gold coin with satisfaction. "I'll take good care of 'em, sir, never fear! Got a bull-terrier of my own at 'ome, sir!"

Blackstone strode away, with that pitiful, whining protest of his darlings ringing in his ears. From that time forth, he was as a rudderless boat, drifting this way and that with every light current of inclination. Sammy had frequent occasion to lecture him upon the evils of "chronic alcoholism," and women of a very low class began to attract his notice. His most respectable acquaintance of the other sex were culled from among barmaids and music-hall performers of the coarsest type.

Millicent Woodward, with her dainty ways, her want of affectation, and her kittenish love of fun for fun's sake, came to him as a revelation. All his assurance forsook

him. He blushed when she spoke to him, stammering and faltering in his answers, more like a timid young novice than the man of the world he thought himself.

Bunny stared at him in astonishment. All his fears were allayed. He did not even resent Milly's frequent and kindly attempts to lure Blackstone into conversation, and he began to adopt a patronising, half-pitying tone towards his gigantic friend.

Had Bunny ever read his Old Testament—that handbook of worldly knowledge—with understanding, he would have remembered that the mighty Samson was but as a child in the hands of his Delilah. He would likewise have perceived, by inference, that just thus must the Israelitish hero have blushed and stammered when he first met the soft eyes of his beloved among the olive-groves of the valley of Sorek. But Bunny would sooner have thought of associating mint sauce with ten-year-old mutton, than of viewing a scene in the St. James's Restaurant, Piccadilly, in the light of an old-world love-story. His mind worked in the narrow groove of the immediate present, and the past was a closed book to him, even as the future. Blackstone's shyness, therefore, laid all his fears to rest.

But, when the coffee was on the table, and the militiaman had as yet made no mention of the cause for which he had come, Bunny, keenly desiring to be left alone with his pretty neighbour, began to be seriously annoyed.

"I say, you know, Blackstone, old chap!" he began, "we can't stay here all day. You haven't said a word to Miss Woodward about that business, you know."

"Oh—er—I forgot!" Blackstone was more confused than ever. "Well, you see, Miss Woodward, it's like this. I want to ask you about those Germans. Geegee—that's the heathen chap I was telling you about—Geegee and I are going to catch them, and give them a thrashing; at least, Geegee's going to do the detective part of the business

—he's a small chap, you know, and a foreigner, like themselves, so they won't suspect him—and I'm going to do the thrashing."

"Yes!" said Milly eagerly. "But how can I help?"

"I don't quite know," muttered Blackstone. "I thought you might be able to tell us of a likely place to find them—that's all!"

"There's the restaurant," she suggested.

"No, I don't think they'll go there again," said Blackstone reflectively. "After their narrow escape this day week they'll go to some other café in the neighbourhood. Could you manage to give me a list of all the foreign eating-houses down your way?"

"That's quite easy," said Millicent. "I'll ask Percy, and I'll write and let you know."

"But, I say," put in Bunny, with a tremor of anxiety, "wouldn't it be easier to send a message by me?"

"Ye—es," said Blackstone doubtfully. "Perhaps that would be simpler. But you have such a bad memory, youngster, that I'm afraid I shall have to ask Miss Woodward to write down the names and addresses."

"Of course I will," said Milly.

"I say, Blackstone!" Bunny exclaimed. "I don't wish to be rude, you know. But you promised Geegee to go back directly after lunch, and it's half-past two already."

Blackstone muttered, "Confound Geegee!" and directly after begged Miss Woodward's pardon. He was not sure whether "confound" was, or was not, a word fit for the presence of ladies, but thought it best to apologise on the chance of it. "I had no idea it was so late," he added, pulling out his watch, "and I can see I'm not wanted any longer."

"You mustn't say that," said Milly earnestly. "I'm sure Douglas didn't mean to be unkind—especially now that you are taking so much trouble on his account."

She cast a glance in Bunny's direction, which, added to the feeling that he had made a fool of himself, quite annihilated that all too sensitive youth, causing him to blush profusely.

"I say, I didn't mean anything beastly, you know!" he blurted. "Of course, I should—I mean, we should be awfully glad if you could stay with us a bit. I was thinking of poor old Geegee, you know!"

"Good-bye, Miss Woodward," said Blackstone, rising. "I must thank you for a very jolly time."

"Good-bye," she said, yielding him her hand. "I hope we shall meet again some day soon."

Colouring with pleasure, Blackstone put on his hat, and passed out into the street.

"He's a queer chap," said Bunny, when a minute later he and Millicent emerged into Piccadilly. "He never thanked me for the lunch or anything!"

"But he thanked me," she replied slyly. "You said only the other evening that we ought to be like one person, now that we're engaged."

"That's true, in a way," Bunny admitted. "But it was rather rude of him all the same. I don't believe he enjoyed himself, though. He's not used to being with ladies, you see. Barmaids are more in his line."

"He didn't strike me as that sort of man at all," said Millicent thoughtfully. "But, then, you know, some barmaids are quite nice, respectable girls!"

"I daresay," said Bunny curtly, "but not Blackstone's sort."

"I thought he was a friend of yours," she said wonderingly. "Do you always say such horrid things about your friends?"

Bunny put on his most fatherly manner.

"It's like this, you see: Blackstone is all very well where men are concerned. But he's a hopeless blackguard—

drinks like a fish and swears horribly!—and he's not exactly the sort of chap one likes to introduce to a girl. He's not respectable, you know! I didn't want him to come to lunch to-day. He practically invited himself, as it was. I assure you he's thoroughly disreputable—not at all a fit friend for any girl. You understand what I mean, don't you, dear?"

"Yes, I do!" she retorted somewhat indignantly. "But I think you're quite wrong in your opinion of him. I expect he only drinks and talks to barmaids because he has nothing better to do. I wish I could introduce him to some nice girl. She would soon persuade him to leave off drinking."

Bunny looked at her in astonishment. Her heightened colour and the vehemence of her words betokened an interest in the subject out of all proportion to his merits.

"Well, where shall we go?" he asked at length, anxious to quit so dangerous a topic. "It's too late for any theatre."

"Let's go out into the country!" she exclaimed. "It's such a fine afternoon."

Bunny promptly suggested Richmond. There was something romantic about the name. Smart men in novels were wont to drive sweet creatures, lovable in their exquisite frailty, down to Richmond in dog-carts of supernal height. After a light supper of oysters and champagne, they drove back again through the park, the stars winking at them out of heaven, as he whispered the most seductive of falsehoods in his fair companion's ear, his breath, redolent of champagne, causing a painful flutter among the feathers of her boa.

Bunny could not drive; but that was no obstacle. Did not hansom-cabs ply for hire, and had he not but lately received his quarter's allowance from home? They also would sup upon champagne and oysters! He would over-

come Milly's teetotal scruples, just for this once. And, if the stars failed to wink at them as they drove home, it should not be for want of good reason.

But Millicent failed to see the proposal in the same starry, romantic light. She knew Richmond well, it seemed, having an aunt who lived there—a maiden aunt of prim, old-fashioned notions—and that particular suburb had no charm for her.

They had reached Hyde Park Corner and were still debating where to go, when an omnibus passed them going in the direction of Kensington. The ungainly vehicle was crowded, inside and out, with passengers. Bunny looked at it with some curiosity, seeking the cause of this popularity; and he caught sight of several slips of paper upon the windows bearing the words, "Kew Bridge."

"I say, shall we go there?" he exclaimed.

"Where? Richmond? No, I tell you, I don't like Richmond," said Milly, pouting.

"How about Kew?"

"The very place. It's so nice and cheap, too. We can take a 'bus to Hammersmith Broadway, and go the rest of the way by tram."

"Not if I know it," said Bunny, hurrying towards a cabstand. "How much would you want for driving us to Kew Gardens and back?" he asked the driver of the foremost hansom.

"A round quid, sir, and wait as long as you like."

"Right you are," said Bunny, who, having no idea of the distance, thought the demand very reasonable.

Millicent protested:

"Oh, you silly boy, it's a great deal too much. Do let's go by 'bus."

Bunny said:

"Get in, dear. It's all right. I know what I'm about."

However much she might doubt the truth of her squire's



last assertion, it was very evident that he was bent upon giving her pleasure at any price, so she held her peace. She enjoyed the drive very much, for Bunny did nothing but expatiate upon her charms all the time ; and, such is the force of a lover's flattery, by the time they drew up at the great iron gates of the Royal Gardens she had grown quite loving and confidential.

Bunny was in raptures as his beloved led him about the grounds, pointing out her favourite nooks and glades ; now stopping to admire some flower-bed massed in living colour, now bending down, with a little sigh of delight, to examine some tiny blossom of rare beauty, nestled among the clinkers of a rockery ; always looking to him, to make sure that he was enjoying everything as much as she was.

But although he was loud in his praises of every object pointed out to him, Mr. Lee-Stretton saw nothing clearly that afternoon, save Milly only. All else was dim and hazy, mere background for the central figure. When he looked back upon the scene afterwards, there was a radiant Millicent standing in a mist of a delicate pale mauve, through which trees and a tall pagoda loomed faint and ghostly. There is no doubt whatever that the somewhat eccentric hue of this mental background is owing to the fact that Miss Woodward was wearing some mauve ribbon in her hat and about her neck that day. The colour suited her so well that Bunny has been known to pause before a shop window for minutes at a time, seeming lost in admiration of a silken gown or blouse. He has been known to turn from the contemplation thereof with tears in his eyes, murmuring, " I say, her colour, you know. Don't talk to me, old chap ! " and to be morose and unsociable for as much as half an hour.

Having refreshed themselves at a tea-house in the grounds, they at length, about the hour of sunset, passed out at the great iron gates, and looked about for their hansom. The

driver had withdrawn, for company's sake, to a public-house by the bridge, and his horse stood patiently before the door, shaking his nose-bag for fodder. Having enticed the jehu from his carousal, Bunny helped Millicent to her seat, and they started on their homeward way.

Milly had become wonderfully silent of a sudden. Although she allowed him to kiss her hand, or rather her glove, to his heart's content, and even let him press his lips to her cheek more than once, Mr. Lee-Stretton was bound to confess that the coming back was the least delightful part of the expedition. Perhaps she had the same feeling, but the fault lay with her, not with Bunny. He, poor fellow, did his very best to enliven the way. He had kissed her hand for at least the thousandth time since leaving Kew, when Milly, who had turned her head away and was looking out of the side window, exclaimed suddenly:

“There they are!”

“Who?” asked Bunny, mystified.

“Mr. Blackstone and the Indian Prince, of course!” she said, laughing softly at his stupidity.

“Oh,” he said drily, “I wonder what they're doing down here. This is Hammersmith, isn't it?”

“They're looking for the Germans!” she said eagerly. “The prince was looking into the window of a Swiss café, and Mr. Blackstone was leaning against a lamp-post watching him.”

“I say, you know,” said Bunny, “that dark chap isn't a prince, or any humbug of that sort. He's only old Geegee, as mad as a hatter. His Christian name—only he isn't a Christian, you know—is Brown. Mr. Brown Geegee is his real name, although, of course, he makes it sound like Hindustani when he pronounces it.”

“What a pity!” said Millicent, in an aggrieved tone. “It was so much nicer to think that he was a prince. He is so very grandly dressed this evening, too.”

Bunny chuckled. "Yes, the silly fool. He thinks he looks like an English lord."

Millicent burst out laughing, and—so contagious is laughter—Bunny forgot his whilom jealousy of Blackstone, and fell a-laughing too. And somehow, in laughing, they drew closer together, and before Milly had time to protest, Bunny had his arm about her waist. So a slight coolness ended in great warmth: active on Bunny's part, passive on Millicent's.

"Please let me go, Douglas," she panted. "I'm sure everybody must have seen you."

"Will you stop the cab, please?" she continued more earnestly. "We're quite near my home now, and I want to get back in good time."

"But I say, you know, I thought we'd have dinner somewhere, and then go—"

"Oh, no, thank you; I must really go home. My mother will be anxious. Besides, you've spent quite enough money on me, as it is. Do, please, tell the driver to stop."

The horse drawing up to the kerb, Bunny jumped out and held her hand as she alighted. Then they set off leisurely in the direction of St. Christopher Avenue, the cabman looking after them with a well-pleased grin as he pocketed his sovereign.

They had gone but a very little way, and the noise of the thoroughfare they had just left was yet loud in their ears when Millicent came to a standstill.

"I must say good-bye to you here," she said, with a becoming air of resolution.

"But, I say, you know," Bunny pleaded, "you might let me take you home. It's getting dark. I really can't let you go all that way alone."

"Nonsense, Douglas, I'm not quite a baby. I have rather a headache, and would rather be alone."

“All right, then,” he said dejectedly. “But you’ll give a fellow a kiss—won’t you?—before you go.”

Bunny stood staring after her, with the warmth of an all too fleeting kiss still upon his cheek. Why did she always avoid his mouth? he wondered. Then he turned his steps eastward, pondering much upon the strange humours of the fair sex, and harbouring, deep in his heart, a feeling that Millicent had not treated him quite fairly.

But, in saying that she wished to be alone, Miss Woodward had spoken nothing but the truth. Her headache, too, was a painful reality, for, ever since tea-time, her mind had been in a turmoil of doubt and regret. Since then, each kiss of Bunny’s had seemed a taunt, almost an insult, each term of endearment had sounded as a reproach in her ears. She loved him not at all. Even that tenderness, which had welled up in her heart, in reply to his first passionate wooing, had proved but a passing sensation. She liked him well enough. He was kind, generous, and honourable in his schoolboy way. He would have been very nice and amusing as a friend and satellite, but as a husband—well, she had fathomed his character in a few hours’ intercourse.

Women, especially in youth, dearly love an enigma, until they have succeeded in its solution. The answer found, all interest is at an end. Therefore, in their reading, they chiefly affect the works of any author who, by a rank growth or tangle of abstruse and obsolete words, does so well hide every germ of meaning, that mere obscurity is clear by comparison. They raise the propounder of an answerless question to the rank of a demi-god, and worship him with all the cant of religious enthusiasm; forgetting that merit and depth of thought, if any there be, lie rather with the man who finds the answer than with him who puts the question.

Bunny’s was as yet a shallow character, easy to fathom.

All his faults and virtues lay very near the surface. There was no mystery attaching to him. He was in no way eccentric. His past history was of the most conventional. Millicent could not repress a shudder at the thought of such a ninny as her lifelong companion.

But he had made her an honourable offer of marriage, and, in a moment of pique, she had accepted him. He was very much in love with her, and the fervour of his passion gave no sign of abatement. She was bound in honour to abide by her word. After all, he was an easy-going, good-tempered creature. Life with him would at least compare favourably with that which she now led, with its pitiful struggle after the shadow of gentility.

At this point in her musing, she reached St. Christopher Avenue and slackened her pace, being loth to enter the house, until she had brought her thoughts to some defined conclusion. It was quite dark now, although a streak of pale green still lingered in the sky to westward, blackening the outlines of houses and chimney-pots in that direction.

## CHAPTER XI.

OF THE DASTARDLY AND UNHEARD-OF CONDUCT OF MR. JONES, AND OF THE HEROIC RESCUE OF A LADY BY MR. BLACKSTONE AND AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN.

IN St. Christopher Avenue and the neighbouring roads, gas-lamps are few and far between, as if the authorities, having sown their seeds of light too lavishly in the main thoroughfares, had been left with only a single handful to be scattered broadcast among the by-streets. Each house has a little strip of garden in front, about three yards deep from the railings to the bow-window of the dining-room; and this space is, in many cases, planted with a small hedge of laurel, privet, or other common shrub, as a leafy screen from the stare of the passer-by.

Millicent, lost in thought, was unaware of the figure of a man—a short man in a suit of garish check, with golf-cap to match—who was leaning over a little iron gate, half hidden by one of these shrubberies. He was evidently waiting for someone, for, no sooner was a footfall heard upon the pavement, than he leaned forward, craning his neck in a vain endeavour to peer through the darkness, which was between the iron gate and the nearest gas-lamp. As the footsteps drew nearer and nearer, his excitement became intense. He leaned farther and farther forward, and at last, with a sound between a gasp and a sob, flung open the gate, and, leaping on to the pavement, barred the way for the astonished girl.

Milly gave a little scream and stepped back, trembling with fright.

“Miss Woodward! lovely Miss Woodward! dearest Milly!” said the apparition, standing before her with outstretched arms. “I’ve been waitin’ for you for hours—just to speak to you once again. Oh, ’ear me!—’ear a desperate man, ’oo loves you, Milly, more than all the dandified swells in all London, all put together!”

“Let me pass!” she exclaimed indignantly, drawing herself up to her full height. “You are no gentleman, Mr. Jones, to dog my footsteps in this way! It’s shameful!”

“Yes, shameful—that’s the sort of word to use to a man ’oo ’as loved you ever since you were a little bit of a thing! I’m not a swell, I know, and I am a tradesman’s son, I know that too, and I don’t speak with a swagger drawl, and my aitches are a bit shaky, I know all that! But I’ve loved you honestly for years and years, and I’d counted on makin’ you my wife some day, and now that you’ve gone and given yourself to another—’ateful puppy!—I feel as if my ’eart was broken, as if there wasn’t anythin’ worth livin’ for, except death! I’ve been neglectin’ my business ever since I learnt the ’orrid truth at your ’ouse, last Saturday. I can’t press people to buy bedsteads, without almost blubberin’ like a baby. It reminds me so of what might ’ave been if you’d been content with an honest, ’omely chap for a ’usband. Oh, Milly, darlin’ Milly! I love you more than I can tell! My life and prospects and all are ruined all through you!”

“Oh, Mr. Jones, I am so sorry!” said Millicent, softened in spite of herself. “But what can I say? I don’t love you, Mr. Jones. You must surely know that I have never loved you. I am so very, very sorry, but I can’t help it; and you ought not to speak to me like this, now that—now that I’m engaged. Please let me go!”

“No, Milly darlin’, don’t ’urry away! It’s the last chance I may ever ’ave of tellin’ you what I feel. I love you, Milly, and I shall always love you, but I can’t ’elp ’atin’ the man that’s robbed me of you. Tell me, Milly, plain and straight. Do you love this dandified fellow you’re engaged to?”

“You have no right to put such a question to me!” said Millicent haughtily. “Your tone is insulting. I refuse to answer!”

“Tell me plain and straight!” Harry Jones insisted, taking a step forward and making as if he would clasp her in his arms; “I ’ave a right to ask, because I love you and ’ave loved you truly, the Lord knows ’ow long! Now look at me! I’m a shockin’ sight and I know it. I ’aven’t ’ad the ’eart to brush my ’air all this blessed day, and I don’t care one ’ang ’ow my clothes look, now that you’ve gone and got engaged to another.”

“You’ve ruined my life, I tell you!” he whispered fiercely, drawing so near to her that she could feel his breath warm upon her cheek. “I shouldn’t mind so much if you were goin’ to marry a fellow that was worthy of you. If you loved ’im, I’d say, ‘Marry ’im, dear, and God bless you!’ But you don’t love ’im; you can’t love ’im! ’E’s got no brains, and ’e isn’t what you’d call ’andsome with that rabbit mouth of ’is. ’E’s not the ’usband for a clever, pretty girl like you. ’E’s as good as me, you’ll say; but I ask you: ’Ow long ’as ’e loved you? ’As ’e loved you ever since you were a little bit of a thing? ’As ’e worshipped the very ground you trod on, ever since the time you wore short skirts and thought it swagger to wear gloves? No, of course ’e ’asn’t! Milly!—angel!—darling! throw ’im over! Let me only ’ope!”

In the reckless daring of his forlorn hope, he seized her in his arms and pressed his thick lips to her cheek. Milly uttered a piercing scream.

“How dare you!” she cried, with a sob, struggling with



feet and hands to be free. "Let me go!—Let me go, I say! I shall call for the police!"

"You shall be mine," he whispered hoarsely; "I can't let you be the wife of that fool. I'll 'old you tight in my arms until you swear to marry me, and if you won't swear it—don't tempt me too far, Milly! I'm pretty well desp'rit! Say you'll throw 'im over, let me only 'ope, and you're free as the air you breathe!"

"Let me go, madman! I hear footsteps. You will be sent to prison for your folly and—and wickedness. Oh, help! help!"

"Say you'll throw 'im over," he hissed in her ear.

"Let me go, I say! Help! Help!"

"Then I'll carry you into the 'ouse till you change your mind," he whispered, the devil completely mastering him, and he made haste to put his threat into execution.

"Are you mad?" she screamed, battling to keep her feet upon the ground. "There are people coming! They are quite close! You'll get hard labour for this; it's criminal. Oh, help!"

A great pulse was throbbing in Harry Jones's brain, deadening all other sounds. He had the strength of one possessed. Already he had succeeded in lifting her in his arms, when he was suddenly seized from behind. At the same moment Millicent freed herself by a violent effort, and sank back against the railings in a fainting condition. Then Mr. Jones, ex-Minister for Foreign Affairs, was himself lifted from the ground and flung with great force into the roadway, where he lay for some seconds, stunned and breathless, dimly aware of a dusky face bending over him, and of a pair of bright almond eyes, that seemed to be making an inventory of his features.

"Sit on his head, Geegee!" said a gruff voice from the pavement.

"Oh, no! Don't be too hard on him, please, dear Mr.

Blackstone!" came in broken feminine tones from the same direction. "He is an old friend of ours, who has been very ill, and—and is not quite himself. This is his house. Do, please, take him indoors, before a crowd collects. I don't want any scandal, if it can possibly be avoided!"

Harry Jones ran great risk of suffocation for the space of half a minute. Then came the order, "Get up, Geegee, you heathen!" and his face was relieved of its burden. He had barely time to recover his breath, before he was seized in a pair of strong arms, raised to a considerable distance from the ground, and, after a brief passage through the air, set down upon his own doorstep.

"Shall I knock, or ring, or what do you wish?"

Harry Jones looked up into the face of the speaker, and hazy memories of the renowned Blunderbore flitted through his brain. "Fairy tales let loose!" he thought. "It's 'ardly fair on a chap!"

"Look here!" said the giant in thunderous tones. "Am I to knock or ring, you little blackguard? I'm only trying to save you, because Miss Woodward wishes it. If I had my way, I'd give you a jolly good thrashing for mauling a girl about like that! You'd better get indoors before a crowd collects, or there'll be a deuce of a row!" With that, Blackstone rang the bell.

"There's no one in the 'ouse," muttered Harry Jones, rising and fumbling in the pocket of his trousers. "I've got a latch-key somewhere!"

"Then get indoors in double quick time, or it'll be the worse for you!"

Mr. Jones made all possible haste to obey; and, having seen him safely disposed of, Blackstone rejoined Miss Woodward and Brown Geegee upon the pavement. A small crowd had already collected at a little distance from the spot. Dwellers in the neighbouring houses, who had

failed to respond to Millicent's urgent cries for help, now that it was all over and there was no fear of having to bear witness to anything, came out hatless into the street, to inquire what was the matter. Certain loafers, of the class whose vocation it is to look on at street fights, had started up, as if by magic, from no one knows where; incarnate wretchedness haunting the back streets on the chance of an odd job, or better still, of a row, where there are opportunities for the just and the unjust—with the thought of a glass of "unsweetened" always in perspective. Could the gutters and dust-heaps of London take human form and walk abroad, they would take such forms as these.

To this crescent of onlookers, Brown Geegee was an object of absorbing interest. Indeed, his dress and bearing were such as to excite feelings of wonder, not unmixed with awe, in the breast of any man. He wore a top-hat, slightly on one side, and a fawn overcoat of dressing-gown length, above whose velvet lapel a very high collar rose in vivid contrast to his dusky face. From beneath the skirts of this ample robe, his boots of patent leather peeped coquettishly forth. In his hand he held a cane, the ivory handle of which he applied to his mouth from time to time, seeming to derive the same solace from the sucking thereof that a baby is supposed to find in the windy sterility of an india-rubber mouth-piece.

The onlookers were as yet undecided whether to regard the coloured gentleman as hero or villain of the drama which they had just failed to witness, when Blackstone emerged from the little shrubbery. Closing the gate behind him, he offered his arm to Millicent, who was still leaning, pale and trembling, against the railings.

"What's the row, gov'nor?" asked an undersized man, in somebody else's cast-off clothes and a battered billycock.

"Oh, nothing, nothing!" said Blackstone impatiently. "The lady has been very much frightened by a lunatic, but

he made off before my friend and I came up. That's all! There's nothing to make a fuss about. Come along, Geegee!"

"Blowed if you ain't the rummest-lookin' cuss I ever set eyes on!" said the undersized man, turning his baffled curiosity upon the coloured gentleman. "Got loose from a wild-beast show, I shouldn't wonder!"

This sally called forth a hoarse chuckle from the other loafers, which became a roar of derisive laughter when Brown Geegee made a blind rush at his tormentor, and, thanks to the ubiquitous length of his overcoat, sprawled full length upon the ground, his topper rolling quite two yards into the roadway.

"'E's a Indian juggler—that's what 'e is!" cried the cause of Geegee's fall, eyeing the prostrate gentleman critically. "Sort of a ackero-bat! Come and get your 'at, Jumbo, old boy! 'Ope yer nose ain't broke!"

Brown Geegee got up, rubbed his knees, and then stumbled into the road in pursuit of his topper.

"Come along, Geegee!" shouted Blackstone, who, in his anxiety to withdraw Miss Woodward from the possible rudeness of the roughs, had walked on, leaving his dusky friend to his fate.

"Get along with yer, Geegee!" cried he of the battered headgear mockingly. "Carn't yer smell the stable, old 'orse? If yer don't 'urry up I shall 'ave to 'old a carrot to yer bloomin' nose!"

Brown Geegee, in desperation, seized his hat, stroked it two or three times with deep solicitude, and then set it firmly on his head.

"You are damfool-satan-filth fellows, all of you!" he hissed, with a display of teeth sufficient to furnish a dentist's window. "I hate you, I despise you, and I spit upon you in the spirit!"

With that he shuffled off up the road, amid derisive

cheers and cries of "Woa, good 'orse!" "Gently, Geegee!" "Mind yer blinkers!" and the like. His heart bursting with indignation, he made all haste to overtake Blackstone and his fair convoy, and, in so doing, nearly ran into the arms of a stalwart policeman, who, with the swiftness of an overfed tortoise, was heading for the scene of riot.

"Ha!" exclaimed Geegee, stepping aside, and viewing the constable in the light of a dawning hope. "Make haste, and you will catch them! There is no time to be lost! They have insulted me most beastly. Moreover, they are, everyone of them, black-satan filthmen. Run, Mr. Policeman! Leap forward like a tiger, or you will be much too late!"

"None o' your sauce, my fine feller!" said the policeman, going on his way with unmoved stolidity. "I mind my business, you'd best mind yours!"

Brown Geegee shouted after him :

"You are a very rude man! You are likewise a wicked-devil fellow, and I will report you to the Queen!"

"One o' these 'ere Christie minstrels!" thought the policeman. "'Ad a drop too much, bein' Saturday, I shouldn't wonder." And, dismissing the coloured gentleman from his mind, he made the best, or rather the most, of his way to the scene of riot, to find, much to his relief, that it was all over and the street as quiet as usual.

At last, panting and breathless, Brown Geegee came up with the objects of his chase. Millicent had let go Blackstone's arm, and was standing with her back to the railings, her fingers playing with the handle of an iron gate. Her rescuer stood by, shy and awkward, now that all excitement was at an end. The arrival of the coloured gentleman was a relief to both.

"Hulloa, Geegee! No bones broken, I hope?" said Blackstone cheerily.

"I do so hope that you are not much hurt, Mr.—Mr. Geegee!" faltered Millicent.

"No, I am not much hurt in my body," began Brown Geegee, with injured volubility. "But my soul is very much damaged. I have been insulted, outraged, and called bad names to! You are my friend, Blackstone, and I love you; but it was not nice of you to leave me to be insulted by those dam-satan fellows!"

"Gently, gently, Geegee! None of your bad language in Miss Woodward's presence. I'm sorry, old chap, but it was better that you should get chaffed a bit, than that Miss Woodward should be insulted by a lot of roughs."

"Ah! In that case I accept your apology with much pleasure," said Brown Geegee, leering at Millicent in his most diabolical manner. "Miss Woodward is a good girl. She is, moreover, beautiful, and I love her!"

"Steady!" said Blackstone reprovingly. "It's bad form to say you love her, when you know she is engaged to Bunny. You'll excuse him, won't you, Miss Woodward? He's only a heathen, you see, and knows no better!"

"Won't you come in and rest a little?" said Millicent. "I should like to introduce you both to my brother. He would wish to thank you, I feel sure! I am so thankful you came just when you did! I could never have explained matters to a stranger, and poor Mr. Jones would have been sent to prison."

Blackstone was divided between a wish to prolong the time spent in her company, and a feeling of loyalty to Bunny. But, Brown Geegee accepting with many salaams, he compounded the matter with his conscience, attributing his eagerness solely to a desire to see that redoubtable brother, for whom Bunny had conceived so strong a dislike. Without reluctance, therefore, he followed Millicent into the house.

"Pray take care of the lamp!" she said, with a whimsical

glance over her shoulder at the giant. Blackstone, contriving to avoid that man-trap, was again forced to bow his head in order to pass into the dining-room.

## CHAPTER XII.

OF THE TERRORS INSPIRED IN MR. WOODWARD BY THE MENTION OF A BULL-DOG, AND OF THE STRANGE OBSTINACY OF AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN.

THE room looked very cosy in the gaslight, with the curtains drawn and the table laid for supper. Blackstone could hardly reconcile its present appearance with Bunny's excited account of the scene on the previous Saturday. He thought it a snug little place—just the right sort of nest for a bird like Millicent. What an ass Bunny was to make so much of little drawbacks, where so lovely a girl was concerned!

“Please sit down!” said Millicent, a little shyly. “I expect my brother is upstairs getting ready for supper. You'll excuse my leaving you here, won't you? I would show you into the drawing-room, only the gas is not lighted there, and I can't be sure that the servant has left it presentable.”

Having seen them installed in arm-chairs, one on either side of the fire-place, she ran upstairs in quest of Percy.

Blackstone glanced round the room with approval, almost with admiration, although there was nothing to admire in it, Millicent being elsewhere. He tried to draw Geegee into conversation upon its beauties; but the coloured gentleman was inclined to be disparaging, saying, with a disdainful sniff, that he preferred something more grandiose, more palatial. Brown Geegee cavilled especially at the fire-screen, which he declared, for no obvious reason, to be “satan-silly.” Whereupon Blackstone would certainly have



shaken him, had not the entrance of Percy put an abrupt end to their bickering.

Blackstone whispered, "Get up, Geegee!" himself setting the example in politeness.

Percy's outer man gave signs of having been hastily tidied up for the occasion. He wore his frock-coat, and the redness of his forehead and temples bore witness to the violence with which his hair had been brushed to its present elaborate smoothness.

"I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Blackstone?" he said, showing a tendency to rub his hands. "I am pleased to see you, though the cause of your visit is none of the pleasantest. How are you, sir? I hope you are quite well, Mr.—Mr.—I've forgotten the other gentleman's name!"

"He hasn't got one," said Blackstone, with a grin; "at least, he hasn't got an English name; and one can't sprain one's throat trying to talk Hindustani. I call him Geegee myself."

"I hope you are quite well, Mr.—Mr. Geegee," said Percy, shaking the coloured gentleman's hand with nervous cordiality.

"Quite well, I thank you," replied the coloured gentleman, with his wonted display of teeth. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance. You are the brother of Miss Woodward? It is enough. I am proud to clasp your hand in friendship."

Percy stood somewhat awkwardly, with his shoulders against the mantelpiece, the spread-out skirts of his frock-coat causing a total eclipse of the fire-screen.

"You'll excuse my sister, won't you, gentlemen?" he said. "She is a little overcome by her adventure of this evening. I must thank you both for the handsome way in which you came to the poor girl's rescue. That Harry Jones used to be a friend of mine. Little did I think that

I was nourishing a viper, so to speak, in my bosom when I appointed him Minister for Foreign Affairs. The fellow must be out of his mind to go assaulting my sister in this way in the public street. It's jealousy has driven him to it—the green-eyed monster, as the poet facetiously puts it. He's awfully gone on Milly—has been for years. Ah! a terrible thing is jealousy, Mr. Blackstone!”

“Jealousy or no jealousy, the fellow's a scoundrel!” said Blackstone warmly.

“Ah! that's the cruel part of it. It's a dreadful thing, Mr.—Mr. Geegee, to find out all too late that one's bosom friend is, to use Mr. Blackstone's own term, a scoundrel.”

“I feel for you,” said Brown Geegee, with a cordial grimace. “It is very nasty to think that one has made himself friendly with a black-satan-filth fellow!”

“By the way, Mil tells me that you gentlemen are friends of my future brother-in-law, Lee-Stretton,” pursued Percy, with an increase of dignity. “Any friend of his may be sure of a hearty welcome in this house. Nice fellow, isn't he?—so affable!”

“Well, I can't say I've noticed it,” said Blackstone grimly. “I should sit on him pretty quick if he tried it on with me.”

Percy was greatly disconcerted at this rejoinder. He took pride in his choice of language, and his exquisite taste in adjectives was a source of wonder and delight to his colleagues of the debating society. Less talented gentlemen would whisper each other that “old Perce had the gift of the gab, and no mistake,” so that the Prime Minister, having a keen ear for whispered comments, had come to regard himself as a past-master in elocution, and that more difficult art known as the choice of the right word.

“I say,” said Blackstone, aware that he had made a blunder, and anxious to change the subject, “do you like dogs?”

"I am very fond of animals," said Percy, mystified.

"Got any in the house?"

"No, not at present. My sister had a toy-terrier, but it died of overfeeding."

"Is she fond of dogs, too?"

"You should see her cuddle them!"

"That's ripping!" said Blackstone, warming to his favourite topic. "Now, look here, Woodward. I've got a bull-bitch at home, with some young pups. I should like to give Miss Woodward one of those pups, if you'll let me. Bull-dogs are awfully faithful, you know, and the little beggar could go about with her and protect her from that villain Jones, or whatever his name is."

"But the house is so small," Percy suggested. "Besides, Mil goes to business every day, and who's to take care of the dog when she's away?"

"Oh, a dog doesn't take up much room, and I'll see that he's properly trained for the house before he's sent up."

Percy's knowledge of dogs and the ways of dogs was very limited. He had a vivid recollection of a certain bull-dog, whose fangs, despite his agonised cries of "Good dog!" and "Did 'ems, den!" had met in the calf of his leg. The ugly scar upon his nether limb had been since shown to intimate friends, previously sworn to secrecy, as a wound received in a duel with a foreign nobleman about a woman. But, whenever a bull-dog was mentioned, the plain, unvarnished truth flushed his brain, sending a tremor through all his body. Blackstone's offer filled his soul with consternation. But it would be only a puppy at first, and by the time its biting powers were fully developed it might perhaps have grown reconciled to Percy's presence in the house. It would be ungracious to refuse. At any rate, the beast could sit in Mrs. Woodward's bedroom and keep her company while the young people were at business. How he wished that he had told Blackstone from the first that he

hated all dogs, and bull-dogs in particular! He determined to consult Elf and Bert upon the subject. They were very knowing in matters canine, and might be able to teach him some way of appeasing the brute.

"Well, then, that's settled," said Blackstone, taking Percy's silence for consent. "I'll write and tell one of our grooms to see to the training of a pup, and send him up here as soon as he's fit."

"Won't you stay to supper?" said Percy, seeing that his guests were in no hurry to take their leave.

"No, thanks," said Blackstone, starting up. "We must be going now. Please say good-bye to Miss Woodward for us; and don't tell her anything about the pup. I should like it to take her by surprise. Come along, Geegee."

But the coloured gentleman did not stir.

"I accept my friend's invitation with much pleasure," he said, with a grimace cordial in intention, fiendish in fact. "I will stay and partake of his supper. I will likewise express my feelings to Miss Woodward in a personal interview."

"The devil you will!" shouted the militiaman, seizing his friend by the velvet collar of his overcoat, and lifting him to a standing posture. "He's only a poor heathen, you see," he added by way of apology to Percy, who was watching the proceedings with great embarrassment. "You must excuse him."

"But Mr. Geegee is most welcome to stay to supper, if he doesn't object to what the poet would call a frugal meal," Percy, in his capacity of host, felt bound to protest.

"Yes, I will stay," said Brown Geegee, rolling his eyes. "I will accept the invitation of my friend, Mr. Woodward. Do—not—assault—me—Bl—Blackstone!"

This entreaty was spoken under difficulties, for Blackstone, keeping firm hold of the velvet collar, began to shake the ill-starred coloured gentleman with all his might.

Brown Geegee's topper slid from his grasp and rolled under the table. His cane, ivory handle and all, fell with a great clatter into the fender. His teeth chattered in his head.

"Had enough—eh, Geegee?" asked Blackstone at length, having reduced his dusky comrade to the required limpness.

Brown Geegee clutched at the chimney-piece for support.

"Yes, I have had enough—too much—much too much," he gasped. "I am more than one half dead. Mr. Woodward, I appeal to you. Do not let Blackstone assault me any more, or I shall feel it my duty to call for the police."

Percy stood by, irresolute. He scarcely liked to interfere on the coloured gentleman's behalf, lest some of the giant's wrath should fall upon himself.

"Come along, Geegee, you graven image," said Blackstone, in a soothing tone. "I didn't mean to hurt you, you know. Come along, and we'll say no more about it."

"But I do not wish to go with you. I wish to stay and have supper with the brother of my beautiful friend, Miss Woodward."

Percy rubbed his hands nervously, and said: "Since there seems to be a difference of opinion, wouldn't it be better if you both stayed to supper? I shall be very glad of your company, though I've only boiled beef and potatoes to offer you. But I can promise you a good glass of ale. Say the word, Mr. Blackstone, and I'll tell the slavey to lay an extra place."

Blackstone hesitated. "But what will your sister think of us?" he said.

"She won't come down again to-night. She's having a cry, I expect, and will want to have supper in her bedroom. That makes it all the easier. One of you can take my sister's place, and I'll tell the slavey to bring an extra knife and fork."

Somehow the discovery that Milly would not be present

at the meal took the edge off Brown Geegee's appetite. He rolled his eyes, cleared his throat, coughed twice, picked his cane out of the fender, and then made a dive under the table for his topper.

"I think I will no longer trespass upon your hospitality," he said, bringing the whole galaxy of his teeth to bear upon the astonished host. "I perceive that you desire to be by yourself. You are my very good friend, and I love you. Convey my affectionate regrets to your sister. She is a sweet-sugar-angel girl. I hope that we shall meet again. Farewell."

"But, Mr.—Mr. Geegee," faltered Percy, completely taken aback by this sudden change in his visitor's tactics. "I thought you were going to stay to supper."

"No, not at all. Pray do not mention it. You are my very good friend, and I perceive that you wish to be alone. It is enough. Adieu."

"Good-bye, Woodward," said Blackstone. "I'm glad my heathen friend has found his manners at last."

"Good-bye, sir," said Percy, shaking the proffered hand. "Proud to have made your acquaintance."

"Ah, I had forgotten," said Brown Geegee, rushing back from the door, and laying down his hat and cane upon the table. He took Percy's hand in both of his, shook it fervently for some seconds, murmured, "Farewell, my very good 'friend. Adieu," let go, resumed his hat and stick, and followed Blackstone into the hall.

"Allow me," cried Percy, rushing forward to open the front door.

"With much pleasure," said Brown Geegee, bowing in acknowledgment of the courtesy.

"You won't forget about the pup—not to tell Miss Woodward, I mean," cried Blackstone from the pavement.

"No, thank you very much. Mum's the word with me. Good-night."

With that, Percy Woodward closed the door, and, going back into the dining-room, rang the bell for supper.

“Rum chap, that Geegee,” he mused over his boiled beef and potatoes. “But the other one’s a real good sort—none of your stuck-up humbug about him.”

The words “I will tell one of our grooms,” recurred to his mind, causing his heart to swell, and his eyes to fill, with the thought that he had spoken to such an one on equal terms. The Woodward family was recovering something of its pristine grandeur. The house in St. Christopher Avenue bade fair to become a favourite rendezvous with the Upper Ten. And Milly was the cause of all this change. That girl was a born aristocrat, a true chip of the old Woodward block. There was no saying to what heights she might not rise. His fancy pictured her, as Mrs. Lee-Stretton, driving past the windows of the bank in her carriage and pair, and himself pointing her out to his colleagues as “my sister, you know.” He pictured himself, as Mrs. Lee-Stretton’s brother, strolling into her drawing-room on a Saturday afternoon in frock-coat and top-hat, with lavender kid gloves, and an orchid at his button-hole, and talking fashionable scandal with Countesses and Honourable Misses.

But when, the table cleared, he settled himself, pipe in mouth, in an arm-chair beside the fire-screen, his thoughts returned once more to the present, and he shuddered, remembering the terrible risk his sister had run that evening.

“That Harry Jones wants horsewhipping with his own whip,” he muttered, as if the mere fact of the weapon being Harry’s own could add to the ignominy of the thrashing. “But I’ll never shake hands with him or speak to him again as long as I live. He got pretty well knocked about by that giant, Blackstone, though—that’s a blessing! But it’s not enough—not nearly enough. Why, it’s an honour

for a chap like that to be knocked about by a man who keeps a dozen grooms or more—blowed if it isn't!"

Then he fell to reviewing the incidents of the evening, and burst into a loud guffaw as he remembered the shaking which the coloured gentleman had suffered at the hands of Mr. Blackstone. And then, for the first time, he saw the whole behaviour of the coloured gentleman in a humorous light, and he laughed until he could laugh no more, but only shake, and gurgle, and squeak; so that the maid-of-all-work, coming into the room upon some household errand, fully believed that "the master" was in a fit, and fell down the kitchen stairs in her haste to get some water to throw over him. The noise of the maiden's fall sobered Percy somewhat. He staggered to the top of the stairs and asked, with an irresponsible chuckle, if she were much hurt.

"Nothin' to speak of, sir," was the timid answer; and the maid-of-all-work beat a hasty retreat into the kitchen, locking and barring the door behind her, in the belief that Mr. Percy was "the worse for drink," and would be "up to some of his tricks" in a minute or two.

But Percy, returning to his arm-chair by the fire-screen, found that this interlude had robbed the jest of all its mirth. The thought of Milly, sobbing herself to sleep upstairs, smote his heart with a fear lest she should have heard his laughter and misconstrued it. She would think him terribly heartless, he thought. And she, the aristocratic one of the family, too!

Then he remembered how he had upbraided her, only one short week since, with the very thing in which he now gloried—her keeping company with swells.

"Well, I did it for the best," he murmured. "One can never tell how things 'll turn out."

Little did he guess that, but for his upbraidings, Millicent would never have pledged her word to Douglas Lee-Stretton.



## CHAPTER XIII.

OF THE STATE OF MISS WOODWARD'S FEELINGS TOWARDS  
HER BETROTHED, AND OF THE UNACCOUNTABLE  
BEHAVIOUR OF AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN.

FOR more than a week after her fright, Millicent was unwontedly silent and depressed. Her pale face provoked much comment among her friends at the office. Even the manager, supposed to be hardened against all feminine ailments, asked her if she were not well, and offered her a day or two's holiday. But upon Milly declaring that she had never felt better in her life he shrugged his shoulders and went about his business. The other lady-clerks, being of a romantic turn of mind, decided among themselves that this altered demeanour was due to a quarrel with "him." But, in spite of sympathetic glances, delicate hints, and even leading questions, they could learn nothing either from Millicent herself or Rose Langley, her confidante, except that she had got rather a headache and thought it must be the weather. When "he," in the person of Mr. Douglas Lee-Stretton, was seen one evening, switching his legs spasmodically before the outer door of the office, the girls were puzzled and a little disappointed. There was no quarrel evidently, or she would never have allowed him to come and meet her after work, and would certainly have scorned to pour out tea for him at a pastrycook's shop across the street.

As for Mrs. Woodward and Percy, they set down the change in her to reaction from the mental strain of her adventure with Mr. Jones.

“It’s what one might expect,” thought Percy. “Why, any girl would have a fit of the blues after a narrow escape like that !”

He made it his duty to be at the station each evening, to meet his sister on her return from business and escort her past the lair of her rejected lover.

But the root of Millicent’s trouble was no mere memory. It was something more than a reminiscent shudder at what might have been. A great struggle was going on within her, and her well-being—perhaps her very soul—was concerned in the issue. She fully realised that she could never love Douglas. She might like him, and even feel for him a certain pitying tenderness ; but surely a husband had the right to demand a stronger feeling.

Her sense of honour and fair play, fostered by a tomboyish childhood to a growth rare among women, forbade her from breaking her promise, once given, to a man who loved her. Love was a serious matter to her now, although until lately she had scoffed at it as a pleasing but wholly extravagant fiction, invented by poets and novelists, partly to give fresh zest to old stories, but chiefly to throw a halo of romance over the, to her, very prosaic and business-like partnership of man and woman in marriage. At last she had come to realise that love was a real and potent fact in life. It may have been that Bunny’s passionate pleadings and fervent kisses had awakened something of a like nature in the bosom of his hearer, revealing a depth and power of emotion till then unsuspected. It may have been by this faint stirring of a dormant force within her that she first awoke to the knowledge that Douglas was only a foolish lad, that, intellectually speaking, she could never look upon him quite as an equal, that she had done herself a great wrong in accepting him for a husband. But the promise was given and there was no help for it.

Had Douglas been a great, powerful fellow, like his friend,

Mr Blackstone, for instance, with the physique of an ancient hero and the disreputable past of a modern, all would have been well ; but as he was, so colourless, so inanely amiable, Millicent could no more love him than she could hate him.

She was kind to him, of course, when he came to meet her after office hours. How could she be otherwise, considering the bond between them? She even had lunch with him as usual on the following Saturday and went with him to the theatre afterwards. But she thwarted his kindly scheme to inveigle her once more into the stalls by exclaiming that she had lost her glove and sending him back to the hansom to look for it. And, when he returned from his fruitless quest, it was to find that Milly, with both her gloves on, had purchased two tickets for the upper circle.

He was very angry : that goes without saying. Still, there was something pleasant in being her guest for once. It showed that she was beginning to take an owner's interest in him, and he flattered himself accordingly. As for Milly, she by no means experienced that fulness of enjoyment which had made the first fateful Saturday of their engagement so delightful. Then Douglas was an unknown quantity, fraught with flirtatious possibilities. Now the limits of his character were but too well known to her.

She could not help thinking how nice it would have been but for that weak, ever-to-be-regretted promise of hers. As a rule she preferred the society of the opposite sex. Moreover she had a pet theory of her own with regard to the practicability of platonic friendships with young men—a theory which had always been disproved in her own case, owing to the too great susceptibility of her male acquaintance. Still, she clung to this theory of hers with all the tenacity or pigheadedness of her sex, and the thought of the pleasure she could have derived from Bunny as a platonic friend only made her resent the more the present sentimental state of affairs.

If only she had had the presence of mind to say in answer to his proposal, "No, I do not love you, but I will carry on a sisterly flirtation with you and you can treat me to lunches and theatres just the same," all would have been well. As his adopted sister, she could have given him good advice and would certainly have taken pains to convince him of the folly and absurdity of many of his ways. As it was, knowing that she ought to cultivate a feeling of wifely reverence, she was painfully aware that there was nothing whatever to revere.

After the play, they had tea together at a shop in the Strand, and Bunny drove her home in a hansom. Having submitted to his farewell kiss, she ran indoors, her brain a turmoil of conflicting emotions.

Jane was standing on a chair in the hall, when her young mistress entered, engaged in the task of lighting the hall lamp. Startled by the opening of the door she jumped clumsily to the ground, extinguishing the taper in her descent.

"Lor', 'oo is it!" she exclaimed, peering into the gloom with mouth agape. "Why, Miss Milly, 'ow you did startle me to be sure! There's company in the dinin'-room, miss."

Millicent, whose only wish was to betake herself with all speed to her own bedroom, was preparing to push Jane aside, when the door of the dining-room opened, illumining the passage with a flood of light.

"Is that you, Mil?"

"Yes, Percy."

"I've got a friend of yours in here," said her brother, with an air of mystery; "you might step in and say 'how d'ye do.'"

Milly drew near to him, trembling.

"Oh, Percy, it isn't Mr. Jones, is it?" she whispered, her hand on his sleeve.

"Jones! I should rather think not," cried Percy, with

a loud guffaw. "If that fellow Jones ever darkens this door again, I'll give him what for. Come in, and see for yourself."

Milly caught herself trembling again, as she thought that it might be Mr. Blackstone—a visitor scarcely less disturbing than Harry Jones to her then state of mind. Then she entered the dining-room, to find herself in the presence of Brown Geegee.

The coloured gentleman rose from his chair and, laying his left hand on his heart, made her a low bow. He wore his long overcoat, his red tie, and his boots of patent-leather. His top-hat adorned the sideboard, his teeth gleamed, and his face puckered to a grin as he held out his hand to Millicent, leering at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"How are you to-day?" he asked, squeezing her hand needlessly. "I am come here this evening to see my honourable friend, Mr. Woodward, and also to inquire whether your health is very much damaged from the event of last Saturday."

"Thank you. I am quite well," she said coldly.

She resented his pressure of her hand more than words could express.

"I rejoice to hear it!" cried Brown Geegee effusively. "If ever I tumble over that wicked-bad devil Jones again, I will cut his dam-evil throat with my pocket-knife."

She said haughtily, "I must ask you not to speak of Mr. Jones in that way. He was once a friend of ours."

Brown Geegee veered round at once.

"Ah, I forgot. Then he is my friend too. I will hasten to clasp his hand in friendship."

Millicent could not repress a smile. Percy laughed outright.

"I don't think you need do that, Mr. Geegee," he said. "Though he is—or rather, has been—'in the happy days of yore,' as the poet so humorously puts it—a friend of

ours, there's precious little love lost between us at the present moment."

"Ha," ejaculated Brown Geegee, for want of anything better to say, and his teeth gleamed and sparkled with comprehension.

"Our friend Mr. Geegee has kindly consented to stay to supper, Mil," said Percy, with some dignity.

"Indeed!" she rejoined coldly. "I'm afraid I must ask him to excuse me. I have a headache, and shall get Jane to take me up a cup of tea to my bedroom."

"Oh!" exclaimed Brown Geegee, rolling his eyes horribly; "you have a headache? Then I will not stay to supper. It is not agreeable when one is ill to have a strange fellow in the house. I will immediately withdraw myself."

"No, no, Mr. Geegee," protested Percy, rubbing his hands and bubbling over with hospitality. "Please don't go on Mil's account. Her bedroom's right at the top of the house, so we sha'n't disturb her. We'll have a cosy evening down here, just you and me together."

"Yes, I will stay," said the coloured gentleman, after a thoughtful pause, during which his grimaces were frightful to witness; "I will stay until Miss Woodward is quite well. I have many things to say to her."

Milly stared at him in amazement and disgust.

"Good-night, Mr. Geegee," she said curtly.

"Good-night—a very excellent good-night," said Brown Geegee, kissing his hand and leering like a brazen idol. "I hope that you will sleep very well. I desire that you may have the most delightful, nice dreams; but before you go to sleep, I beg you to come down and see me for a little minute. You are a good girl, and I love you. Good-night."

Percy fled into the passage to indulge in a private burst of laughter. Millicent strode haughtily to the door. Upon the threshold she turned and surveyed the coloured gentle-

man with a glance that would have frozen the native of a less tropical clime ; but Geegee only grinned, murmuring :

“ Good-night. Nice dreams.”

“ Is Mr. Blackstone well ? ” she lingered to ask.

The militiaman had always appeared to her as Brown Geegee’s master or keeper, and she was curious to know by what means the coloured gentleman had escaped his vigilance.

“ Yes, he is well,” said Brown Geegee, with a snarl ; “ he is always well ; he has the health of a satan elephant. I wish he would die. He assaults me at all times without my permission. He persecutes me, and makes me very angry. Then he laughs. He is my good friend, and I love him ; but even little evil worms will turn one day.”

Millicent was quite frightened by the vehemence of this reply to what she had deemed a natural and harmless question. She began to look upon the coloured gentleman as a madman, and longed to escape from his presence ; but sounds of convulsive laughter still came from the passage, and she felt it her duty, in the cause of common politeness, to withdraw the visitor’s attention from Percy’s doings.

Brown Geegee continued, with ever-increasing volubility :

“ Yes, even little nasty worms will turn. Listen, and I will tell you. This afternoon, Blackstone and I together, we went out to look for the Germans. We went to a little restaurant—ugh, it was a filth-unsavoury place. Then Blackstone said to me : ‘ Go in and ask questions.’ And I answered, ‘ No,’ but he made me go in all the same. I had some tea, and then I came out again ; but I had not asked any questions, so he threatened to wring my neck. Then we came to another restaurant, and he told me to go in there too. But I said, ‘ No,’ and got very angry ; and he cursed me and called me a fool, and said that I was spoiling it all. Then I said that I would go home and resume my studies. And he said ‘ Go,’ and, moreover, he called

me a dam-satan ass into the bargain. Ha! Even little nasty worms will turn."

"Ask Mr. Geegee to excuse me one minute, Mil!" cried Percy from the passage; "I'll go upstairs and get ready for supper!"

"But if you wanted to go back to your work, why did you come here, of all places?" asked Milly, mystified and a little amused.

"Ah," said Geegee, with a singularly offensive leer. "You ask me why I come here? Listen, and I will tell you! You are a good girl, Miss Woodward. Moreover, you are very beautiful, and Bunny loves you, I love you, everybody loves you! I think—I feel quite sure—that Blackstone is beginning to love you too. So I came round to tell you the tale of how he treats me, to inform you what a foolish-satan man Blackstone is; to warn you against that wicked-devil fellow, and to ask you to keep your nice, sweet, beautiful sugar-caresses for Bunny and me! Oh, confound it all!"

The last words were uttered in the disappointment of the moment, when Brown Geegee suddenly realised that he was haranguing an empty doorway. He sank back in his chair with a prolonged Hindustani curse, picked up his cane, and began sucking its ivory handle for consolation. In this posture and occupation Percy found him when, a minute later, he returned to the dining-room; and, as he knew nothing of what had passed in his absence, he was at a loss to account for the sudden change in his visitor's manner.

Brown Geegee was very surly and snappish all supper-time. He quarrelled as far as politeness would allow, and further, with his victuals, sniffed at the beer, and nearly broke the tender heart of the little maid-of-all-work, by sneering openly at the pudding. In short, he made himself so generally disagreeable that Percy had the keenest satisfaction in bidding him farewell.



"I hope he'll never come again," said Milly, at breakfast, next morning. "He's mad—I'm sure he is!"

"He certainly is the rummest card I ever set eyes on," Percy agreed. And his thoughts ran in the same groove, as he smoked a Sunday-morning series of pipes, while his sister was at church.

From the evening of Brown Geegee's visit forward, Millicent recovered her good spirits. Her friends at the office asserted, in spite of proof to the contrary, that it was because she had made it up with "him." Percy and her mother were of opinion that she had forgotten the Harry Jones episode. But the true secret of the change lay buried deep in her own unfathomable, feminine heart, and remains a secret to this day.

Often, when the weather was fine, she would return from the city upon the top of an omnibus; and more than once from this point of vantage, she descried the commanding form of Blackstone and the cringing figure of Brown Geegee, lurking in the neighbourhood of some foreign eating-house. She was kept informed of their movements by Bunny, and always listened with vivid interest, even after all excitement as to the possible capture of the Germans was past.

Blackstone's perseverance was wonderful. With Brown Geegee in attendance, he haunted the purlieus of Hammer-smith and Fulham every evening for the space of two months without coming across the slightest clue; and, undoubtedly, this search served, in the absence of his dogs, to keep him out of mischief. He felt that, in this hunt for the Germans, he was not only trying to avenge Bunny, but also, indirectly, to serve Miss Woodward, who might well be supposed to have Bunny's interests at heart.

A great change was taking place in the militiaman's character. He was becoming daily more gentle and, at the same time, more reserved. Even Brown Geegee had less

cause to complain of his treatment, and the future turning of worms was seldom mentioned between them. The education of the bull-pup, which he destined for Millicent, was a constant anxiety to him ; and the luckless groom, charged with its training, received a letter from his young master almost every morning for a month.

Sammy, the little old tutor, snorted and sniffed with satisfaction whenever Blackstone asked leave to withdraw to his own room for private study, little dreaming that the study of a much-thumbed, veterinary authority on the breeding and rearing of dogs was implied.

But, in proportion as Blackstone grew calmer and more settled, Bunny became daily more restless and uneasy. He developed a passion for lonely walks, and would often neglect his work, in order to indulge this new propensity of his. Truth to tell, his mind was ill at ease. Each day brought him nearer to the summer vacation, and the necessity of keeping his engagement a secret from the home people was a burden upon his conscience. The prospect of parting with Milly for six long weeks, without even the consolation of seeing her hand-writing, was not a pleasant one. He dared not run the gauntlet of the questions which his father, his mother, and above all his sister, were sure to ask if he received letters in a feminine hand. He would be sure to blush and stammer in his answers, and they would guess his secret. However, in eight months' time he would be twenty-one ; and then, in the first flush of manly independence, he would marry Millicent, writing the very same day to tell his father of the event.

He thought at one time of asking his father's leave to remain in London during the holidays. He even began a dutiful letter to that effect. But Sammy cut the ground from under his feet by taking a house at Broadstairs for five weeks. Brown Geegee, likewise, having no relations in England, was bound for Broadstairs at Mrs. Thompson's

pressing invitation. She thought the coloured gentleman "a dear, docile creature," making him useful in many little ways. Blackstone proposed to spend August with his father and his dogs in the country; and the day-pupils would, in the ordinary course of events, join their parents at various watering-places. The house in Kensington was to be shut up and left in charge of a caretaker. So, when the time came, Bunny was forced, whether he would or no, to seek the shelter of the parental roof tree, feeling happy as a schoolboy who leaves his mother for the first time.

## CHAPTER XIV.

IN WHICH MISS WOODWARD IS DELIGHTED, AND HER BROTHER CONFOUNDED, BY THE GIFT OF A YOUNG BULL-DOG.

ON a sunny morning in mid-August, Millicent was sitting at her mother's bed side, reading such extracts from the newspaper as she thought likely to enliven the invalid. It was the first day of her yearly holiday, and the knowledge that a whole week's idleness lay before her lent a cheerful note to her voice, very pleasant to hear. When she had waded through the column called Fashionable Intelligence, she asked :

“Shall I go on, mother, or are you tired?”

“We haven't had any deaths yet, dear,” said Mrs. Woodward cheerily. “Surely somebody of importance has died?”

“There's the usual column of births, marriages, and deaths. I'll read through the names, if you like.”

“No, no,” said her mother, with an impatient gesture. “I don't care a rap about Brown, Jones, and Smith! Look for the death of someone interesting, dear!”

Millicent rustled and re-folded the paper, but in vain. Glancing over the last page, she said :

“I can't find anything, mother.”

The invalid murmured peevishly :

“Dear me! What a stupid paper!”

“Stay! Here's a paragraph,” exclaimed Milly. “‘Death of a well-known sportsman.’”

“Read about him by all means, dear! We must make the best of him, I suppose.”

Milly folded the paper and began :

“ ‘ We regret to record the death of ’—oh, mother !”

She let fall the paper, pressing her hand to her forehead distractedly.

“ Well? Go on, dear! Why, what’s the matter with the girl? ”

“ It’s the father of that nice Mr. Blackstone I told you about—who helped me, that night, you remember! I am so sorry for him !”

“ Ah, you don’t say so? Dear, dear! How very shocking! ” murmured Mrs. Woodward, with unction. “ Please read me all about it. It is so much more interesting when one knows something of the people.”

Millicent picked up the paper again and read ; but the note of cheerfulness was silenced, as a linnet in the shadow of the hawk, and her voice rang dull and listless without it.

“ ‘ We regret to record the death of Sir Nicholas Blackstone, baronet, who died suddenly, yesterday morning, at his residence, Wulborough Hall, Wiltshire. The deceased was a keen sportsman of the old, bluff, hard-riding school, and his death leaves a gap in the sporting life of his county which can never be re-filled. He was educated at Harrow and Cambridge, succeeding his father as 6th baronet in 1861. His only son, the present Sir Arthur Blackstone, is a lieutenant of militia. The funeral will take place at Wulborough Churchyard on Wednesday at one o’clock.’ ”

“ Ah, very interesting—very interesting indeed,” murmured Mrs. Woodward, as her daughter laid down the paper. “ Sixth baronet, did you say? Quite an old family! I hope you will bring Mr. Blackstone—I beg his pardon, Sir Arthur—up to see me when next he calls !”

“ I think it unlikely that he will call again,” said Millicent, with a hint of sadness in her tone. “ He will have so much

to think of; and besides, he is sure to have forgotten all about us by now. He will leave Mr. Thompson's at once, I should think. But I shall find out for certain from Douglas, when he comes back from his holidays."

"That Douglas of yours is a perfect ninny!" said Mrs. Woodward, with peevish candour. "I've no patience with him. What you see in that rabbit-mouthed boy to make a fuss about, is more than I or anyone else can imagine. Now, if it had been Mr. Blackstone, a full-grown man, handsome, and of really good family, I could have understood it better. Why, you're not going to leave me, dear?"

Her daughter had risen, and was standing with her back to the bed, one hand plucking nervously at the fringe of the counterpane.

"Yes, I think I shall go now, mother, if you don't mind. I have some sewing to do."

"Well, you can bring your sewing down here, I suppose?" said her mother petulantly—"and then you can tell me all about Mr. Blackstone and the Indian prince!"

Millicent declined this invitation somewhat hastily, saying that she had to do the cutting out of her new blouse, and would on no account make her mother's room in a mess with the shreds and strips of stuff.

"Well, of all the obstinate girls, commend me to Millicent!" thought Mrs. Woodward, turning upon her pillow. With that, she picked up the novel which she had been reading before her daughter came in, and was soon lost to all else in the world.

Milly ran upstairs to her own bedroom, and locked the door behind her. There she remained until one o'clock, when she went down to her mother's room to dinner. All the bloom and freshness were gone from her holiday. Listlessness and a tired, wistful look in her eyes betokened that all was not well with her. She ate little and spoke

less. But Mrs. Woodward paid no heed to these symptoms of distress. Propped among her pillows, with her plate upon her knees, and her novel in her more immediate lap, she was a living plea for the possibility of doing two things at once. She looked up for a minute with a slight frown, disturbed by the clatter of plates, when Jane came to take away the dinner things.

“Jane! How clumsy you are to day!” she cried testily. —“Do you know, Millicent, there is a character in this book who reminds me very much of your friend, Mr. Blackstone—I beg his pardon, Sir Arthur! Just such another handsome devil-may-care young fellow! You must really bring him to see me, next time he calls.”

Rising hastily from her chair, Millicent announced her intention of going out for a walk.

“Very well, dear. Do as you like.”

Her mother was once more lost in her novel.

The loneliness of her walk in the sunshine and the fresh air had the effect of a tonic for Millicent. She lingered upon Hammersmith Bridge, and, heedless of the passers-by, leaned over the parapet, watching the water as it swirled and eddied between the piers. Beyond the squalid houses of the riverside, the square tower of Hammersmith Church tapered up into the sky. There was bustle among the wharves of the left bank about the loading of some lighters and a wherry. The hoarse rattle of a crane culminating in a prolonged roar, the shouts of men, the clank of chains rang out full-toned and mellow across the water. A tug came fussing round the bend from Putney, puffing and snorting, with a train of dingy barges in tow, leaving a mighty wash to either bank. A man on one of the barges, clad in a red jersey, was singing cheerily at the top of his voice.

How could any girl be selfishly unhappy amid this eager bustle and hum of life? A fresh breeze blew in her face

with a dash of salt in it. The river danced and sparkled to her out of the soft, grey haze. She went home with heightened colour and a lighter step. Percy, upon his return from the bank, kissed her with a new pride, declaring that he had never seen her look so well. But we mortals depend in great measure upon the sun for our spirits, and it needed only a rainy day to bring back all Millicent's despondency.

On Saturday afternoon, the last day of her holiday—for Sunday, of course, did not count—as she was sitting with Percy in the dining-room, there came a knock at the door.

“It's a chap dressed in black,” said her brother, going to the window; “and he's got something under his arm. A tradesman cadging for orders, I shouldn't wonder—or else an advertisement!”

Millicent remembered, not without confusion, that she had given Jane a holiday to go and see her mother, that the task of answering the door therefore devolved upon herself. She made haste to put off the dainty apron which she wore in her capacity of housekeeper. The knock being repeated, she clapped her hands to her hair in an agony of arrangement, and ran to the door. She looked out cautiously.

“Does Miss Woodward live 'ere, please?”

The speaker was a bandy-legged young man of wholesome, bucolic appearance. He was clad in a decent suit of black, which he wore with all the uneasiness of his Sunday best. With one arm he clasped a peculiarly hideous, sullen-looking bull-dog.

“Oh!” exclaimed Milly, fascinated by the ugliness of his burden, which regarded her drowsily with half-closed eyes, its head resting upon its fore-paws, its hind legs dangling helpless. So astounded was she at sight of the dog that she forgot for the moment to reply to the man's question. He waited stolidly for his answer.



"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she said, at length recovering her surprise. "I am Miss Woodward."

"I beg your pardon, miss," said the youth, pulling his forelock. "I wouldn't 've made so free if I'd known who you was. Sir Arthur's compliments, and would you accept—"

"Do, please, come in and sit down!" cried Milly, in a sudden gush of hospitality. "And bring the dear little dog with you."

The man complied, brushing his boots with great care upon the mat and twirling his hat nervously in his hand. Millicent ushered him into the dining-room.

"This is my brother," she said simply.

The man touched his forehead to Percy, murmured, "My service to you, sir," and stood awkwardly, shifting his weight and that of the puppy from one foot to the other.

"Please sit down!" said Milly, pushing forward an arm-chair.

"Thank ye kindly, miss," he replied, taking a more modest and less comfortable seat.

At first sight of the bull-pup's face, Percy had edged away to the farthest corner of the room, on the principle that "distance lends enchantment to the view." Having entrenched himself behind the writing-table in the window, he hazarded a timid "good dog," and, finding that the puppy took no notice, grew bolder and said "Did 'ems!" quite loud.

"'E won't bite, sir," said the groom reassuringly, so that Percy for very shame was bound to sally forth from his stronghold.

The man began again, "As I was sayin', miss, Sir Arthur's compliments, and will you accept this 'ere pup as a little present from 'im?"

"Oh, how good of him!" she said, reaching forward to pat the ugly head in a way that made her brother's blood

run cold. "Will you give him to me to hold, please, Mr.—Mr.—"

"No, miss," the groom corrected her, with a grin, as he transferred the puppy to her arms. "Bill, that's what I'm called. Just Bill, miss. No mister nor nothin' o' that sort. I 'ope I knows my place. If I might make so bold, miss, I'd recommend you not to fondle 'im overmuch. It makes 'em lazy and sickly."

Millicent put down the puppy upon the carpet. It looked up sleepily into her face, with head cocked at an inquiring angle, a single tooth, overlapping the upper lip, adding to its ugliness; then it trotted off upon a tour of inspection.

Percy, his face ghastly pale, had barely presence of mind to murmur, "Oh, good dog, good dog! Poor old fellow!" as the puppy sniffed about his legs. "Lie down, good dog!"

To his great surprise the puppy actually obeyed, curling itself contentedly at his feet. This was quite the most embarrassing course that the brute could have taken. Feeling that a hostile eye was upon him, criticising all his movements with intent to bite, Percy sat very still and held his breath. At length Millicent held out a hand to his relief, saying coaxingly, "Come here, puppy!" The dog gathered itself together, looked up with moist eyes into Percy's pale face, and then trotted with clumsy deliberation to its new mistress, whose hand it essayed forthwith to lick.

Mr. Woodward uttered a sigh of relief, and fell to twirling his moustache with endless ferocity.

"How did you leave the bart.?" he asked, turning to Bill.

"Beg pardon, sir?" was the puzzled reply.

"How did you leave Sir Arthur?" Millicent explained, fondling the puppy's head.

"Very 'earty, thank ye, miss. Was in a great takin' about

master's death, but since the funeral, 'e seems more like 'is old self."

"I suppose he will not be coming to London again to study?" said Milly, gazing at the puppy's unsightly face with a far-away look in her eyes.

"'E's goin' back to 'is tutor's in a month's time, miss. Why, it was only yesterday 'e said to me, as I was swillin' out the loose-box, 'Bill,' says 'e, 'I want more book-learnin'. A baronet,' says 'e, 'ought to know pretty well everything. So I'll go back to Sammy's'—that's what he calls 'is tutor, miss—'for a term or two. But,' says 'e, 'don't you think I'm goin' into the army, because I'm not!"

Millicent thanked the honest rustic for his information; while Percy, his eyes closed, basked in the rays of a bart.'s friendship. "My friend, Sir Arthur Blackstone, Bart." How well it sounded. His colleagues at the bank would turn livid with envy. To his mind's eye there was a halo about the bullet-head of the groom. Indeed, the whole dining-room shone with a new and awe-inspiring light, and even the puppy was glorified in the transmuted radiance of his titled donor. "Sent a groom up to our place on Saturday, he did, with a present of a valuable dog for my sister." He longed for Monday to come, that the bank might be thrilled to its foundations.

"I must be goin' now, miss," said the groom, rising, and again touching his forehead. "I was to catch the five-thirty from Paddington."

"Do have a glass of beer before you go," said Percy, rising also.

He felt that he owed a debt of gratitude to the man, who had called him "sir" several times, and had touched his forehead to him once.

Bill looked modestly at the brim of his hat.

"Well, I don't mind if I do, sir."

Percy rang the bell in his grand way ; but Milly took the wind out his sails, saying :

“ I don’t think Jane is back yet. I’ll go and see about it myself. Come along, little dog. What is his name, Mr.—I beg your pardon—Bill ? ”

“ Sir Arthur left the namin’ of ’im to you, miss.”

“ Well, I think I shall call him Sambo. He looks like Sambo, don’t you think ? ”

“ I can’t say, miss—never ’avin’ seen one, to my knowledge ! ”

“ Well, come along, Sambo,” said Milly, making towards the door.

“ No, no, miss, I couldn’t think of allowing you to take the trouble,” said the groom, with the dignity of one who knows his own place and other people’s. “ It’d make me right ashamed, that it would.”

There was no cause for further protest, for at that moment Jane appeared in the doorway, in her hat and cape, panting and breathless.

“ Bring up a bottle of beer and a tumbler,” said Percy, with the air of a Wellington at Waterloo.

“ If you don’t mind, sir—I could take it just as well in the kitchen, sir,” said Bill, again touching his forehead.

Percy was on the point of protesting, but Millicent forestalled him, by commending the groom in warmest terms to the hospitality of the little maid-of-all-work. Jane grinned all over her face, wiping her hands excitedly upon a corner of her cape, in the absence of an apron. She so seldom had any company in the kitchen, that she hardly knew how to behave. He seemed such a respectable young man, too, that she felt quite taken aback.

“ Thank ye, miss,” said the groom, bowing himself out of the room. “ Good-day, sir. I ’ope the pup ’ll give satisfaction, miss. I’ve took some pains with the trainin’ of ’im. Get back, Sambo.”

He shut the door just in time to stop the dog, who showed a sudden desire to follow his old friend, even to the lower regions.

"I wonder what we ought to feed him on!" Millicent exclaimed, when she and her brother were alone together. "I must write to Mr. Blackstone this very evening and thank him."

The puppy was sniffing at Percy's trouser-leg, in a way which made the unhappy inmate tremble. He could only falter :

"Don't give him meat, whatever you do. It makes 'em fierce. Dog-biscuit's the thing. I'll go and buy some, as soon as the wretched brute thinks fit to leave me alone."

"Wretched brute, indeed," she cried indignantly, making as if she would pick up the dog and clasp it to her breast, which were consolation enough for any ill that dog or man could suffer. "He's the sweetest dog in all the world.—Did 'ems call 'ems yetched boot, den, did 'ems?—Have you noticed what a queer, waggish expression he has, Percy?"

"He has the face of the devil himself," said Percy impressively. Whereupon she chid him for his wickedness in no measured terms, and, all the time that he was ranging the streets in search of dog-biscuit, she did her best to make up for his rudeness to her new pet, by assuring the puppy repeatedly, in the language sacred to lovers, habies, cats and dogs, that he was "ye uvliest ickle pet'ems in all ye world, zat he was."

## CHAPTER XV.

IN WHICH EVERYONE, EXCEPT MR. SAMUEL THOMPSON, IS  
OBSEQUIOUS UPON THE ARRIVAL OF A BARONET.

ON a certain rainy afternoon towards the end of September, an unwonted flutter of excitement pervaded Mr. Samuel Thompson's house from roof to basement. Maid-servants kept hurrying up and downstairs, to and from a certain room on the topmost storey, which, to judge by the amount of time and labour expended upon it, should have been the most cleanly and the best-ordered chamber in all London.

A history lecture was going forward in the class-room—the lecturer, an earnest young man fresh from the University, and new to the ways of a crammer's pupils, being somewhat hampered in his speech by the cloud of tobacco-smoke from six sturdy pipes and the coughing engendered thereby. Brown Geegee, Bunny, and, in a lesser degree, the rest of the pupils, gave no heed to the lecturer's embarrassment. They thought nothing of his learned and eloquent eulogy of the British Constitution. Smoking their briars in short, excited puffs, they listened for every sound of wheels in the street without, glancing expectantly at the door from time to time.

Mrs. Thompson sat at her writing-table by the dining-room window, her eyes wandering from the open book before her to the street, and from the street back again to the printed page. The book was the baronetage and knightage of England by one Debrett, the street was Tenby Gardens, South Kensington, which was that day to witness

the arrival of a walking, talking excerpt from the aforesaid volume at Mr. Samuel Thompson's house. Sammy alone of all the household was quite unmoved by the bustle and stir around him. In his study, dozing in an arm-chair by the window, a musty old volume upon his knee, he heard the commotion, as if it were a faint echo from another and a baser world, not caring to inquire its cause or meaning.

If twenty baronets had invaded the study, each one holding out a blood-red hand to the shaking, Sammy would not have been in the least surprised. He would have shaken hands all round with a snort and a sniff, would have called them "nice, gentlemanly young fellows," would possibly have warned them against the dangers of "chronic alcoholism," and would at last, without doubt, have offered to each of them a cigar. Then he would have dismissed them courteously, and, returning to his book, would certainly have forgotten all about them.

His study was his kingdom, and within its narrow bounds he held absolute sway. The little room, entirely surrounded with books, had an uncanny look seen in the rain-blurred light of that September afternoon—a look that would have brought him to the stake, had his lot been cast in the Middle Ages. The dust lay thick upon the shelves—for Sammy would have died sooner than allow a servant, and that a female, to finger his treasures—so that each volume sent forth a pungent cloud, when he opened and shut it with a bang, previous to examining the contents. A small step-ladder leaned in a corner of the wall, by aid of which the little old bookworm could reach to the very topmost shelves. An industrious colony of spiders had veiled the nooks and corners of the room with silken drapery of a delicate mouse-colour, and festoons of cobwebs, broken in places, hung from shelf to shelf.

In the early days of her married life Mrs. Thompson had waged hot war against this untidiness, declaring, with tears

in her voice, that it was a disgrace to the house. Once, when her husband had gone out book-hunting for the day, she had invaded the sanctum, followed by two maids, armed with duster, scrubbing-brush, and broom. She had herself spent six hours in tidying books and papers, while her followers performed the menial tasks of sweeping, dusting, and scrubbing. Viewing her finished handiwork with arms akimbo, she had said, "How nice and tidy it looks! How pleased Samuel will be!"

But Mr. Thompson, on his return, became suddenly transformed. Instead of a docile, inoffensive little book-worm, there was a raging maniac in the house. All his books were disarranged, he said, which was nonsense, seeing that she had spent a whole day in arranging them; he could not find the papers he wanted; he was a stranger in his own den.

All this had affected Mrs. Thompson deeply. "I am sure I meant it for the best, Samuel," she had faltered between her sobs. "I declare I'll never meddle with your horrid, cruel room again!" And, much to her husband's comfort, she kept her word, having first extorted from him a promise that he would do a little dusting now and then upon his own account. He had accepted the duster she gave him with many thanks, and had forthwith dropped it to the bottom of the waste-paper basket, whence it had been emptied into the dust-bin, together with a mountain of paper, by a careless maid.

About five o'clock a knock sounded upon the front-door, and the whole house seemed to answer the summons. The uproar penetrated even to the study, causing Sammy to move uneasily in his chair with a snort of disdain.

"I suppose Susan is having a tea-party," he muttered. "I am very busy. I cannot possibly leave my work."

He repeated the last two sentences in the tone of an actor rehearsing his part. His wife's tea-fights were the



terror of his life. When someone knocked at the door of the study, his worst fears seemed realised. His knees trembled so that the volume fell from them on to the floor, closing with a loud report.

"Er—come in," he muttered with a sniff; adding, under his breath, "I am very busy; I cannot possibly leave my work," much as a saint of old murmured a text or prayer in presence of the evil one.

But no charm was needed in this case. The evil one was, to Sammy's mind, an essentially feminine principle, and the figure which now entered the room was in every way manly. Peering through the gloom, with the aid of his nippers, the tutor descried the imposing form of his pupil, Blackstone.

"How-do-you-do, sir?" said the militiaman, shaking his tutor warmly by the hand.

"Er—very well, thank you. How are you?" said the tutor, going through his whole gamut of snorts in the relief of the moment. "You are a nice gentlemanly young fellow, Mr. Blackstone. Have a cigar?"

At that moment he caught sight of a black band upon his pupil's coat-sleeve, and vague memories stirred in his brain. Somebody was dead, that was certain; and he would be expected to say something by way of condolence.

"Ah—er—very sad, very distressing!" he sniffed. "Still in the prime of life, I am told. I had not the pleasure of the—er—of the lady's acquaintance myself; but I can sympathise with you—er—sincerely. Very sad—very distressing, indeed!"

Blackstone chuckled audibly, much to his tutor's horror.

"I came to tell you, sir, that I have given up all idea of going into the army," he said. "I never really stood a chance, you know."

"Given up all idea of—er—of going into the army!" exclaimed Sammy, toying with his glasses. "Then—er—

then all your education is wasted. Does your respected father know of this?"

"Can't say, sir," said Blackstone, a little sadly. "But I'll ask a parson, if you like."

"Er—Mr. Blackstone," said the tutor, with a snort of deep solemnity, "I must once more warn you against the dangers of—er—in fact, of chronic alcoholism. Your speech this afternoon is, I—er—grieve to say it, wild and—and disconnected. I cannot accept the decision of—er—of a clergyman in this matter, though many of them are, I am told, nice gentlemanly young fellows. Your father has always paid for your tuition, and it is for him to—er—to decide."

"My father's dead, sir—that's the long and short of it," said Blackstone hurriedly. "I shall be paying for myself in future. I wrote and explained matters to you a month ago. Didn't you get my letter?"

"Ah, yes. Now I—er—now I recollect," said Sammy, swaying his nippers to and fro upon their cord. "But I understood that your mother was dead, not—er—not your father. I had a pupil years ago—he's colonel of his regiment now—whose mother died suddenly. He wore a black band upon his sleeve, I—er—recollect, just as you do. This is really very distressing!"

"Well, sir, I want to study a few useful subjects, like arithmetic and geography, you know, before settling down at my place. Can you suggest anything likely to be useful to a country gentleman?"

"Let me think," muttered the tutor, bewildered by the sudden change of subject. "I do not recollect ever to have had a pupil for—er—for that examination. I must look it up in the Civil Service Guide."

"No more exams. for me, sir," said Blackstone emphatically. "I've done with 'em for good. Have you got any books on agriculture?"

“Agriculture—agriculture! I had a pupil once who went in for agriculture, I—er—recollect. He went to some college—in Suffolk, I think it was—and then—er—and then proceeded to the backwoods of America. No, I have no books on—er—on that subject; but I will inquire the names of the leading writers, and then I can procure them for you.”

“Thank you, sir. And if you could manage to get me a book or two on horse-doctoring, I should be obliged to you. The ‘vet’ down at our place is an awful fool, and it’s always as well to know something of that sort of thing. Good-evening, sir.”

“Agriculture, he said,” mumbled Sammy, going to his writing-table. “I must make a note of it. Horse-doctoring! I seem to have read about that somewhere. Horse-doctor—horse-leech! He has some daughters, if I remember rightly. There are lots of dressed-up young females who—er—who would be only too glad to entrap a nice, gentlemanly young fellow. I must warn Mr Blackstone against them.”

Meanwhile, the subject of his solicitude, having rushed up to his bedroom to make sure that his luggage was safely housed, ran downstairs, causing a mighty creaking of the banisters and shaking of the whole house as he jumped the last four steps of each flight, and burst like a bracing east wind into the class-room, with its murky, smoke-laden atmosphere. The earnest young lecturer was squeezing certain bulky volumes of authority into a black bag, preparatory to taking his leave. The pupils were on the point of dispersing.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” Blackstone said, with a nod to the lecturer, “but is Bunny here?”

Bunny was there and very much at Sir Arthur’s service. He was rushing forward to shake his friend’s hand, but Brown Geegee forestalled him in the act if not in the design.

“Blackstone, you are my very good friend,” said the coloured gentleman, with a cordial grin. “I am delighted to welcome you back once more. I rejoice to shake you once more by the hand. We will go together and catch the filth-wicked Germans. I hope that you are not very much vexed at your father’s sad decease. I sympathise with you in your sadness.”

“Good old Geegee!” said Blackstone, squeezing the hand of his very good friend until hot tears filled the coloured gentleman’s eyes. “I say, Bunny, come upstairs to my room, will you? I’ve got lots to say to you.”

Having renewed his acquaintance with such of the other pupils as were known to him, Blackstone led the way upstairs, three steps at a time, Bunny following to the best of his power. Once in the bedroom he flung himself upon the bed, while Bunny took his seat upon a portmanteau. The wind blew in fitful gusts across the roofs; now roaring in the chimney, rattling at the window, and dashing the raindrops helter-skelter against the pane; now sinking to a distant murmur, or dying away in a deep-drawn sigh.

“Beastly weather, isn’t it?” Blackstone said. “It was just like this at the governor’s funeral.”

Bunny, anxious to avoid so painful a topic, blurted out:

“I say, you know, I’m awfully glad you’ve come back! I hardly expected you’d turn up again, now that you’ve come into the property.”

“How’s Miss Woodward?” Blackstone asked irrelevantly.

“Oh, quite well, thanks. I saw her yesterday evening—went to fetch her from business, you know. I say, she’s got a beastly bull-dog up at her place. Some old friend of the family gave it her. If there’s one thing I loathe it’s a bull-dog, they’re such ugly beggars. And this little brute seems to return the compliment, for he always snarls at me when I go there.”

Blackstone was on the point of revealing himself as the

giver of the puppy, but the thought that Miss Woodward had chosen to keep his name a secret held him back. She had good reasons, no doubt. Besides, the pleasure of sharing any secret with so charming a girl was not to be lightly forgone.

“How does Miss Woodward herself like the dog?” he asked.

“Oh, she seems awfully fond of it—makes quite a pet of the beast. She actually calls it pretty, and asks me to agree with her, when any fool can see that it’s as ugly as sin.”

Had Sir Arthur Blackstone been at all conceited, he might have made Miss Woodward’s affection for his gift the ground of much self-flattery; but, so great was his own love of dogs, Millicent’s devotion to her new pet seemed the most natural thing in the world. He was glad that she was pleased—that was all.

After a long silence he said:

“I’ve been having an awful time of it since the funeral. Such a lot of business to do, lawyers hanging about the house and all that sort of thing. I’ve been cursing Death Duties, and Probate Duties, and Succession Duties, and all the rest of their humbugging, swindling red tape every day for the last month; and as if that wasn’t enough, I’ve been having visits of condolence from half the ladies in the county—people who never came near the house in my father’s time. The card tray in the hall had to be emptied once a week. Some cycled over, some drove, just a few walked. I couldn’t make out what they came for until I complained to our old housekeeper. She pursed up her mouth and sniffed a bit, and then the truth came out. They’ve all got daughters or youngish sisters whom they’d like to see mistress of Wulborough Hall. Seem to think I’m a beastly Mormon or something in that line.”

“But, I say, you know! I suppose you’ll think of settling down soon?” hazarded Bunny, whose mind ran in

the matrimonial groove. "You'll be awfully lonely in that big house all by yourself."

Blackstone yawned.

"I've got the dogs, you see," he said. "A fellow can't very well be lonely with a couple of dozen of 'em yelping about the place. Besides, who the devil am I to marry? If I were in your shoes, young 'un, I might be keen on it. But I'd sooner marry a barmaid than one of these Society women."

He paused to light his pipe, which he had been filling slowly for some minutes past. Then, as the smoke began to rise, he continued :

"I've been to one or two balls in my time, not to speak of 'At Homes' and garden-parties, and I've kept my eyes open. There are several sorts of girls one meets about, and they're none of 'em what I should care to have for a wife. There are some who are awfully icy and stuck-up. They're always sneering, too, and make you feel a bigger fool than you really are. There are some who giggle at every word you say, making eyes at you all the time, and generally behaving like a long-clothes baby. Then there are others who drop their g's, and ask you for tips about horses. They reek of the stable, though they mostly use pretty strong scent to hide it. I'm a bit in that line myself, you know, and two of a trade never agree.

"Then there's another sort—mostly a bit long in the tooth ; these are—who have loud voices and talk about Browning, or some such ass, who wrote poetry that no decent fellow ever reads. I have an aunt of that sort, and she used to make me read all manner of rot when I stayed down at her place. You'll find a really jolly one here and there among the married women, but they're out of the question, and like all good things they're rare."

He paused, looking long and thoughtfully at a black speck upon the ceiling.

"They ought all to have been drowned as pups," he remarked sententiously. "It's a shame to let creatures like that grow up. They're a public nuisance, Bunny, that's what they are. Now, in Geegee's country they used to kill lots of 'em at their birth, till some missionary chap came and interfered. It's high time they introduced something of the sort in England."

Bunny protested.

"But I say, you know, what a bloodthirsty chap you are."

He had a general notion that, from a man's point of view, there cannot be too many women, if only for choosing purposes. He began a long eulogy of, or rather rhapsody upon, the fair sex, which—if the apothegm be true, that a man's view of women is largely matter of digestion—spoke volumes for Bunny's internal machinery. His eloquence was checked by a timid knock at the door.

"Come in, whoever you are," roared Blackstone.

"Have you all that you require, Sir Arthur?" came a feminine voice from without. "I will send up the maid with some hot water as soon as the first dinner-bell rings. And, if you wish it, the bootboy can unpack your luggage in the course of the evening. I regret that we have no man-servant for the present."

"Oh, I'm all right, thank you, Mrs. Thompson," said Blackstone, jumping up hastily and opening the door. "Please make no fuss about me. I'm used to the ways of the house, you know."

Mrs. Thompson persisted, in her most insinuating tone :

"You are quite sure you have everything you want? You have only to ring the bell, remember."

"Yes, yes," said Blackstone, a little impatiently. "I'm all right. The room suits me down to the ground—always did."

"It's very good of you to say so, Sir Arthur." There

was a raising of the voice as she retreated towards the stair-head. "But I'm sure so old a friend will excuse my deficiencies. I must really persuade Samuel to engage a man-servant."

Blackstone shut the door, dropping a whimsical glance in Bunny's direction.

"What's that for, I wonder?" he exclaimed. "I've had this room for something like four years, and she never made any fuss about me before."

"Just like her snobbishness, you know," said Bunny, with a scornful grin.

Though not himself wholly exempt, he could deplore the taint in others.

"Anyone would think I was the Lord knows who from the way she behaves," muttered Blackstone.

And the pair smoked on till dinner-time in silence, save for the muttering and howling of the wind and the gusty patter of the raindrops upon the pane.

During the first few days of his return to London, Blackstone was far from comfortable. The deferential attitude of the mistress of the house, who did her utmost to lure him into the drawing-room, whenever there were visitors to be impressed, the obsequious readiness of the maid-servants to do his lightest bidding, the unwonted restraint of his fellow-pupils, owing to his recent bereavement—everything tended to make him feel strange and uneasy in the familiar surroundings. But, in course of time, this awkwardness wore off. Finding all her wiles of no avail, Mrs. Thompson gave him up as a bad job. The servants gradually relapsed into their former, easy-going impertinence. The pupils soon threw off their reserve; and things went on much as in the old times, before his father's death.

One morning Sammy entered the class-room, clad as usual in dressing-gown and slippers, staggering under the weight of a huge pile of volumes.



“Er—I think you asked for some books on—on agriculture, Mr. Blackstone,” he said, with many sniffs. “I—er—sent to my bookseller about them, and here are a few. He will send some more in a few days.”

Blackstone eyed the pile before him with a comical, half-rueful expression of face.

“How about the horse-doctor book, sir?” he asked.

“Oh, yes—er—I recollect! There are two works upon the subject in this—in this lot; and I have given orders that all the authorities upon the subject shall be bought—er—in fact, bought on your behalf.”

Blackstone was disposed to protest against the expense of this wholesale purchase of authorities, where only the simplest text-books were needed. But, on second thoughts, he decided to let Sammy have a free hand. The books would be useful for reference. They could have a case to themselves in the library at Wulborough. With a whole case of such auxiliaries at his back he would be able to confute the local “vet,” whenever their opinions clashed; and the awe engendered in the bucolic mind by large, solidly-bound books would help to win over the tenant-farmers to certain improvements he had it in his mind to make. He set to work that term as he had never worked before in his life. The subject appealed to him, was already known to him in the rough. The technical terms had been as household words in his ears from babyhood. The ease with which he assimilated the contents of chapter after chapter astonished no one so much as himself. He had fallen into a groove of study, which, to use his own expression, “suited him down to the ground.”

He had frequent news of Millicent through Bunny, who met his betrothed regularly twice or thrice in a week. It is likely that the thought of her was, in some way, an incentive to his work. The very hopelessness of his attachment acted upon his essentially healthy mind as a tonic.

He had now an ideal—not a very high one, perhaps, but still an ideal—beside and above himself. Something of the sort was needed to rouse him from the intellectual torpor incidental to a large allowance and complete freedom from responsibility. The disturbance caused by Millicent's entrance into his life, had helped to stir his mind to a more active and personal view of life. It had made him think.

## CHAPTER XVI.

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THE ABDUCTION OF AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN FROM A MUSIC-HALL, WITH ALL THAT BEFELL HIS PURSUERS IN A FOG.

THE year wore on, autumn almost imperceptibly paling to winter. November came, and with it, frost and dense, choking fogs, which hung a tawny curtain against the windows. The outlook from the dining-room at Sammy's was narrowed to the area-railings, the suggestion of half a yard of pavement beyond, and the ghost of a street-lamp. It was like looking at the world through the thickest of horn spectacles.

On one of those foggy evenings, when lamps seem to consume their own light, Bunny, Blackstone, and Brown Geegee set out in search of amusement. By some mysterious means of locomotion, they found their way to a music-hall, where all the stars of the variety firmament were announced to appear each night—to shine or twinkle, according to their various properties. The fog had found its way into the auditorium. Its presence was acknowledged by the majority of the audience, with much coughing, sneezing, and blowing of noses.

Brown Geegee was in full evening dress, his dusky face and hands seeming almost black, by contrast with the dazzling whiteness of collar, cuffs, and shirt front. His long fawn overcoat was thrown open, so as to hide none of these splendours, and a diamond stud sparkled upon his bosom. Blackstone, whom no mortal eye had ever seen in a great-coat, towered above the herd of lesser men, in an every-

day suit of heather tweed. Bunny wore a long robe of the same cut and material as that worn by the coloured gentleman. His low-crowned billycock was tilted back from his forehead as usual. He walked with a forward stoop, switching his calf from time to time with the handle of his cane. The exaggerated swagger of his gait and the eccentric slope of his shoulders were remarkable even in a music-hall, where such figures most abound. His elbows raised, he handled his gold-tipped cigarette with exquisite grace, every whiff being an epitome of aristocratic carelessness and ease. The nonchalance with which he knocked off a tapering pyramid of ash, bringing his little finger to bear with the utmost dexterity, was inimitable.

The trio attracted its full share of notice from the other loungers of the promenade. Men nudged each other as they passed, casting half-envious glances after Blackstone's commanding form, grinning at Bunny, and laughing openly at Brown Geegee. Women of the gorgeous complexion and the languorous eye threw many an alluring look in their direction, causing Brown Geegee to roll his eyes and leer back in his most fiendish manner.

"Let's have a drink," said Blackstone, when they had stood for some time watching the antics of a funny gentleman upon the stage—a gentleman in semi-clerical garb, with face preternaturally white and nose preternaturally red, who mimicked the rolling walk and hiccupping speech of a drunken man, to the entire delight of the audience. The applause was deafening.

Bunny's whole frame was convulsed with laughter.

"I say, you know, isn't he killing?" he exclaimed. "The fellow's a genius!"

"Oh, it's easy enough," said Blackstone. "The chap gets a bit screwed, comes on to the stage, and the thing's done. Come and have a whisky and soda, young 'un Geegee, you ape, what are you gaping at?"

“Do you see that lovely lady over there in a red cloak with fur all round the edges of it?” said the coloured gentleman in excitement. “She is, moreover, very like to my dear beautiful friend, Miss Woodward. Perhaps it is herself. I will go and pay my courteous respects to her.”

Blackstone seized his dusky friend by the brown velvet collar of his overcoat, and shook his topper awry.

“Look here, Geegee!” he whispered, “if you dare to compare any woman here to Miss Woodward, I’ll throw you down into the stalls! Now, come and have a drink!”

Brown Geegee gulped down his whisky in sullen silence, never so much as lifting his glass in acknowledgment of Blackstone’s hearty, “Here’s luck to you both!”

“It clears the fog out of one’s throat,” the baronet said. “Have another?”

“No, it’s my turn now,” Bunny protested, with a wink and a nod to the barmaid; whereupon that young lady opened a soda-water bottle in the off-hand manner of her class.

“Three, didn’t you say?”

“Yes, certainly,” said Bunny, surprised at the question. “Hullo, where’s Geegee?” he muttered, looking round aghast.

The coloured gentleman was nowhere to be seen.

“He’s gone to have a talk with the woman in the red cloak, I wouldn’t mind betting,” Blackstone said. “Well, I wash my hands of him!” He volunteered the information that “niggers are obstinate as pigs,” for the barmaid’s enlightenment. “We’ll go and look for him in a minute, Bunny.”

But, when they regained the promenade, neither Brown Geegee nor the lady in the red cloak were anywhere to be seen. Blackstone gripped his companion’s arm.

“Look here, Bunny, we can’t let the heathen slip through our fingers in this way. He may get in an awful mess!

We must search the house. You go that way, I go this. We'll come back here and compare notes."

So the pair separated. Bunny sauntered down to the level of the stalls on his side, and, after a fruitless search, retraced his steps. He was just passing the promenade exit when he saw the backs of three men going out arm in arm. He in the middle wore a long fawn overcoat with a brown velvet collar. His hair below his topper was black and lank.

Bunny called down the passage :

"Geegee—Geegee, old chap!"

The three turned for a moment, so that he saw their faces. Then they hurried streetwards, in spite of some reluctance on the part of the middle one. Bunny leaned against the wall for a few seconds, feeling dazed and bewildered. Then, recovering himself, he rushed down the passage, the stairs, and out into the street, just in time to see a hansom drive off with the objects of his chase, and disappear into the fog.

"For heaven's sake, stop them," cried Bunny wildly, appealing to the passers-by in general. "Hansom!"

At that moment a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, and Blackstone's voice asked :

"What's the row, young 'un?"

As Bunny made no answer to the question, but shouted for a hansom more lustily than ever, Blackstone dragged him aside into a dark entry to avoid the notice which his friend's strange demeanour and cries were beginning to draw upon them. There he gathered a general idea of what had happened, more from the reproaches, with which he was loaded, for having prevented Bunny from setting out at once in pursuit of the fugitives, than from any attempt at explanation. His assurance that they were powerless to help the coloured gentleman served only to anger his companion, and to render him more abusive. He was

puzzled, wondering what to do with Bunny, who was plainly out of his mind, when someone plucked at his sleeve. Looking down he encountered the knowing grin of an undersized man of dishevelled and ragged appearance.

There was a hoarse whisper :

“ Say, guv'nors ! If you're after them chaps, I can give you a tip. 'Eard the d'rections as was give to the cabby ! ”

Blackstone gripped Bunny's arm to call his attention. A blaze of electric light from a great restaurant across the street, changed the fog locally into a luminous haze, through which the shapes of cabs, omnibuses, and vans moved ghost-like. The pavement was thronged with gaily-dressed women ; and men of every class slouched by in the glare of the lamps, from the loafer in evening dress, carefully wrapped in greatcoat and scarf, to the beggar in his rags. Blackstone's eyes dwelt for a moment upon the scene, as he looked about him to make sure that the little group in the doorway was attracting no undue notice.

“ Well, what 've you got to say ? ” he asked of the loafer.

“ 'Arf a crown, guv'nor, and I'll tell you all I know ! ”

“ What do you take me for ! Let's have your information, and I'll pay you what it's worth. ”

“ Garn, capting ! No coin—no tellin' ! ”

The man thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets, making as if he would walk away.

Bunny whispered uneasily :

“ Give him the money ! We're only wasting time ! ”

Whereupon Blackstone stepped up to the man.

“ Here's half a crown for you, ” he said. “ But mind, none of your tricks ! ”

“ S'elp me never ! ” The mouldy one clutched the coin, and straightway spat upon it. “ The address was 'Arford Gardens, Cam'den 'Ill. Strike me dead, if that ain't gawspel truth, kernel ! ”

Putting a strong curb upon his excitement, Blackstone asked :

“The number?”

“Come now, m’lord! That’s worth another ’arf-crown, that is!”

“You shall have it when you have told me the number.”

“It was either twenty-five or seventy-five—can’t say which! But I take my blimey oath, so ’elp me bob, it was one o’ the two!”

In consideration of the “blimey oath,” Blackstone handed over a second half-crown, and, turning to Bunny, asked his advice as to what was best to be done. Disdaining all parley, with the insistence of a monomaniac, Mr. Lee-Stretton called loudly for a hansom; and, while Blackstone was still pondering the suggestion in his mind, he was already on the step of a cab.

“Drive to Kensington Church, as fast as you can in this confounded fog!” shouted the baronet, and jumped in after his friend.

The carrying off of Brown Geegee before his very eyes, his fears for the coloured gentleman’s safety, the irritation engendered by what he held to be a needless delay—above all, the fog, which seemed to baulk him on every side, had disturbed the wonted calm of Bunny’s temper. He was disposed to cavil at the direction given by Blackstone, saying that none but a lunatic would think of driving to Kensington Church, when Campden Hill was where he wanted to go. But Blackstone dealt gently with him, merely threatening to get out of the cab and leave Bunny to go through with the adventure alone. Whereat Bunny changed his tone at once, declaring himself to have behaved like an ungrateful beast, and humbly begging his friend not to leave him on any account. Blackstone deigning to explain that he had mentioned Kensington Church as being in a bee-line from their starting-point, and therefore more



easily to be reached in the fog than their ultimate destination, Bunny professed himself entirely satisfied, and peace was restored once more.

They had passed the galaxy of Hyde Park Corner, and the fog lay so dense and black along Knightsbridge that they could see nothing beyond the splash-board. Of a sudden, the horse's hoofs clattered upon stone, and the cab gave a mighty lurch, throwing Bunny sideways against Blackstone. At the same moment, the driver cried, "Woa," and they came to a standstill.

"On the pavement!" said Blackstone laconically. "Just what I expected!"

Bunny said nothing. He was bewildered by the darkness, which was as a wall about the vehicle.

The cabman climbed down from his seat, shouting:

"It's no use tryin', sir! There ain't a driver in London could keep off the kerb such a night as this. You'd best walk, if you're in a 'urry, sir!"

The two sprang out on to the pavement, and Blackstone bestowed a florin upon the cabman. Then they set out, arm in arm, into the stifling darkness, keeping, so far as possible, in touch with walls and area railings. From time to time they passed under a lamp—a little cocoon of yellow or primrose haze, high in air—which only enhanced the darkness of its immediate neighbourhood. The sound of footsteps was constant upon the pavement, and, as Blackstone's plan of keeping to the railings seemed to have been generally adopted, collisions were not wanting to enliven the way.

As they drew near to the Albert Hall, the gloom became perceptibly less dense. At Queen's Gate they could see the lamps of the opposite pavement—faint smudges of pale lemon-colour upon the night. An omnibus loomed in outline close at hand, with the ruddy haze of a lantern at

the horses' heads. Vans and drays were something more than a shouting of the blind among the blind.

It was a quarter-past ten by Blackstone's watch when they reached the corner by St. Mary Abbot's Church. They were now drawing near to the end of their walk, and Bunny began to have misgivings. He proposed that they should go to the police-station and ask for a constable or two to help them in their quest; but Blackstone would hear of no such thing. The police, he said, were no fun at all. Let Bunny but leave the conduct of the business to him, and all would be well. They had passed into a quiet region, where lamps were far apart and there was little or no traffic. Blackstone halted at a street corner, and peered up at the wall of the nearest house.

"It should be somewhere hereabouts," he said; "but how on earth are we to find out the name of the road?"

"I believe there's a pub across the way," cried Bunny, "to judge by the noise."

"I'll go there and ask," said Blackstone, and he disappeared into the darkness of the roadway.

Just at that moment twin lights gleamed out of the fog, and the outlines of a horse and cab, at first blurred and ghost-like, became more distinct with every second. The driver shouted, on the chance of being heard by someone:

"Is this 'Arford Gardens, can any gent tell me?"

Bunny replied that he did not know, but that it was somewhere thereabouts.

"This fog is a black-satan fog, and I dislike it!" came a well-known voice from the hansom. "I will now descend. I will moreover return at once to my very good friends at the music-hall."

A loud laugh greeted this speech.

"It no goot going back to de music-hall. You come along vid us, and have vun glass of viskey. Oderwise, you

catch cold. De mister catch cold, if he not have de viskey—nicht wahr, Fritz?”

“Gewiss—quite true!”

Bunny's first impulse was to spring forward and denounce the Germans; but the thought that they were two, not counting the driver, whereas he was but one, held him back. In the meantime, the hansom melted once more into the fog, and only the beat of the horse's hoofs remained to assure him that what he had heard and seen was something more than a phantom of his heated brain. Even that sound had died away, when a shout from Blackstone informed him that that gentleman had met with success in his inquiries at the public-house, and was at present waiting for him in the middle of the road. After sundry manœuvres, involving more than one complete change of their relative positions, the two friends at length caught sight of one another.

Bunny, in an excited whisper, related what had passed in Blackstone's absence; whereat Blackstone, exclaiming that there was no time to be lost, caught hold of Bunny's arm and set off up the road, at as brisk a pace as the darkness would allow.

“This is Hertford Gardens,” he exclaimed as they went. “The Germans live at number seventy-five on the right-hand side. The barmaid said she knew them quite well by sight. They have taken to calling themselves counts, it seems.”

They made their way along by the railings, stopping at every gate and striking a match to examine the number. It was slow work, and the hopes of both were already somewhat dashed, when a sound of wheels and a leisurely fall of a horse's hoofs were heard approaching. A minute later, and two round patches of yellow haze came towards them, like filmy eyes out of the gloom.

“Hi, there!” shouted Blackstone. “Where's number seventy-five, do you know?”

“Just come from there myself. You keep along that side and you’ll find it. It’s a good fifty yards ’igher up,” came the answer, in a husky voice.

For a moment the blurred outline of horse, cab, and driver was visible. Then they passed, and the fog wrapped them from mortal ken.

The friends pursued their way, Bunny touching the clammy railings for guidance. At length Blackstone stopped and struck a light, which showed an iron gate, bearing the wished-for number. He threw the match from him. It flickered for a moment upon the pavement, then it went out, and the darkness was even more bewildering than before.

“It’s an awkward business, young ’un,” said Blackstone thoughtfully—“a deuced awkward business! We’re not justified in breaking into this house until we’re sure that they’ve done some harm to Geegee.”

“But, I say, you know! Who ever thought of breaking into the house? Why not walk up to the door and ring the bell like ordinary visitors? We can say we’ve come to call for the Indian gentleman.”

“There’s something in that,” said Blackstone, stroking his moustache.

“But I think we’d better not ask for Geegee. It might rouse suspicion. And you’d best keep in the background, Bunny! They know you too well. Come along!”

He raised the latch of the gate, which swung open, ringing upon its hinges, and they made their way along a narrow paved walk between bushes.

## CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH TWO COUNTS AND A COUNTESS ARE PRESENTED TO THE READER IN THE LIGHT OF OLD ACQUAINTANCE, AND AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN IS DISCOVERED IN A LARDER.

“HERE’S the house !”

“Looks shut up !”

They stood a moment in silence, scanning as much as could be seen of the front of the building. It appeared to be a squat cube of a house, for they could discern a window on either side of the door and the sills of three in the upper storey—just such a dwelling as a child might draw upon his slate, and laugh at the grotesque likeness to a human face. Suddenly, a light streamed forth from the window immediately above the door, making a yellow stain upon the night—a little corner of light, as if a heavy curtain had been pulled or brushed aside in passing. Then all was dark as before. Bunny’s teeth chattered in his head. All his old, unreasoning dread of the Germans was upon him. He feared to enter the house lest, by so doing, he should once more fall into their clutches. In a tremulous whisper, he suggested to Blackstone that perhaps they had better go home, as he did not see of what service they could be to Geege. But Blackstone held his arm in a grasp of iron.

“Now then, youngster, no shirking,” he said ; “keep close to me !”

“But I say, you know !”

“Shut up !”

Blackstone stood upon the doorstep, groping about for the bell-handle. There was a click, followed by a faint tinkle from within. Bunny instinctively drew back a few paces.

"Keep to heel, young 'un," whispered his companion fiercely.

After a brief interval of silence, a light appeared in the hall, and the door was opened half an inch.

"'Oo's there?" came a timid, feminine voice from within.

"It's only me," said Blackstone soothingly. At the same time, he leaned his whole weight upon the door, inserting his foot as a wedge, and forced it open.

"'Oo is it? Oh, 'elp, 'oo is it?"

"Is the Count at home, Jemima Jane, or whatever your name is?" asked Blackstone, in his most insinuating tone. "We've come a long way through this confounded fog for the pleasure of seeing him." He dropped a whisper over his shoulder: "Come along, Bunny. It's only the slavey!"

The door offered no further resistance, he stepped into the passage. A small lamp was burning upon a table at the foot of the stairs. Its light shone upon the wall-paper, the oil-cloth, and was reflected from the polished surface of banister and handrail. A slovenly maid, in a greasy, print dress, cowered before him. To Blackstone's mind, sharpened to the simile by a course of agriculture, she carried the idea of a seed potato untimely sprouting. Hooks and eyes had parted company in the more protuberant regions of her figure, so that strings and stray frills peeped forth, like young shoots yearning for the light.

"Both the Counts is in, sir," she said, recovering from her first alarm, and surveying Blackstone's proportions with an admiring grin. "And Mr. Jones is in, too, sir, if you was wishin' to see 'im."

She shut the door behind Bunny, who shuddered as he heard it slam. There was no longer any hope of retreat.

They must go through with the adventure for weal or woe. A low mutter of voices in agitation came from the stair-head. There was no time to be lost.

"I know my way, thanks, Susan," said Blackstone, making for the stairs. Bunny followed close at his heels, more from fear of being left alone than from any wish to rival his friend's valour.

The slatternly girl stared after them in open-mouthed wonder, not unmixed with admiration. A varied experience of policemen had taught her to value such things as height, breadth, and muscle in a man. She sighed as she looked after him, bursting two more hooks by the incidental upheaval of her bosom. Then she yawned, and was preparing to retire for the night, when a hubbub upon the floor above alarmed her, and she took refuge in the dining-room, rather than brave the perils of the stairs, while the gentry were "that outrageous." Blackstone, striding upstairs three steps at a time, with Bunny at his heels, had come into collision with a human form. In the heat of the moment, without waiting for parley or explanation, he dealt that human form a blow with his fist, which laid it sprawling on its back upon the landing. There was a great and prolonged spluttering, a German oath or two, and then someone made a vicious grab at the baronet's legs, receiving a tremendous kick for his pains. Whereupon Blackstone cursed the servant for having left them in the dark, and bade Bunny strike a match, that he might see what he was killing.

Mr. Lee-Stretton obeyed, not without misgivings.

On the floor, at Blackstone's feet, a man lay writhing in great pain. Evidently the kick had taken effect; but with what part of his anatomy Blackstone's boot had come in bruising contact, it would have been hard to say; for the man writhed all over alike, nursing now his knee, now his elbow, with the strictest impartiality. In the back-ground

of the landing, beyond reach of blow or kick, cowered another man, his fingers upon the handle of a door. Both were in evening dress. Scarcely had the assailants time to take in these details of the scene, before the match burned Bunny's fingers, and had to be dropped. Blackstone made a blind rush forward, groping for the second German, at the same time calling loudly for a light, and exhorting Bunny to keep kicking the fellow on the ground, to make sure that he did not get up. He at length succeeded in laying hold of the object of his gropings, when he forthwith proceeded to twist that gentleman's collar in such a way as to render his breathing matter of great difficulty, apoplexy the obvious conclusion. The immediate result was much wriggling and kicking on the part of the victim, together with an intermittent flow of German expletives.

In obedience to an order from Blackstone, Bunny struck a second match, and opened a door which was opposite to the stairhead. A flood of light streamed out upon the landing. A thick curtain, just within the room, accounted for the fact that no light had been seen through the chinks of the door when closed. Blackstone followed Bunny, pushing the prisoner before him.

It was a large room, furnished with a vulgar attempt at luxury, such as is sometimes found in the bars of public-houses. The chairs, the sofas, and a divan in a recess beside the fire-place, were covered in tarnished crimson plush. A large mirror, in a gilded frame, served as over-mantel, the glass being cracked in two places. A cumbrous chandelier, branching to three globes, hung from the ornate centre of the ceiling. Only one of the jets was burning.

Upon the divan beside the fire-place lay a man in the sleepy stage of intoxication. A tall bottle, a glass jug half full of water, and an empty tumbler stood upon a table near him. The atmosphere was sickly with the smell of spirits.



Blackstone, still keeping firm hold of his prisoner, sent a keen glance of inquiry round the room. A thick curtain, similar in texture and colour to that which concealed the door, hung in heavy, dusty folds before either window. Its like adorned the wall at the end of the recess, seeming to mask an exit.

“Just look behind that curtain over there!” he said to Bunny. “They’ve hidden the graven image away somewhere!”

Bunny made haste to obey. There was a door leading to another room—a bedroom—empty, so far as he could see. At the same time a door slammed somewhere upon the same floor, and a faint scuffle was heard upon the landing without. The other German was making good his escape, Blackstone thought, and turned his whole attention to the prisoner.

“What have you done with him?” he roared, shaking the unlucky German until all his bones rattled.

The man spluttered :

“I vill shtand dis no more ! I vill tell Fritz go fetch de police ! Vat you vant, I vill know, breaking into a mister’s house in dis vay ! Vat you mean, I say ?”

“None of your humbug !” said Blackstone fiercely. “What have you done with the Indian chap you kidnapped from the music-hall ?”

“I know noding about him,” replied the German doggedly. “I am Count Weissmann. Dis is mine house. You break into it. You hurt my broder, de Count Fritz. You hurt me. Also—de police vill hear of dis !”

Blackstone relaxing his grip, the pseudo-Count wriggled himself free and sat down upon the sofa, gasping and rubbing his neck. The assailants were now in an awkward dilemma. They could by no means prove that Brown Geegee had ever set foot in the house ; and the violence of

their entry would be very much against them, should the German make good his threat of calling in the police.

"Look here, Count Vice—what's your name!" said Blackstone soothingly. "If we've made a mistake, we're sorry, and we'll say no more about it!"

"Ve vill say no more about it, you dink," snarled the German. "Ve shall see dat. De police vill hear of dis, and den ve shall see. You are dam scoundrels," he screamed, his courage growing as that of his opponents seemed to dwindle. "You break into mine house—de house of Count Weissman. You assault mine broder Fritz; you assault me. De police vill hear of dis."

"Shut beastly row," came a hiccupping voice from the divan. "Want goat sleep."

"Ah, Herr Jones," cried Weissman, "you just vake up, and bear vitness dat dese shcoundrels break into mine house."

The man upon the divan raised his head, opened a pair of bleary eyes, in which was no intelligence, and murmured, "Shurrup—you shurrup, y'ear?" Then his eyes closed, and his head fell back once more into the old listless posture.

Blackstone was about to renew his apologies, when an idea struck him.

"We have to speak to you about another little matter," he said grimly. "You and the rascal you call Fritz robbed my friend here of a diamond ring and a silver watch some months back, not to speak of his clothes."

Weissman, who had hitherto bestowed all his attention upon the baronet, now shot a keen glance at Bunny, and his brows contracted.

"Leave de house," he cried suddenly, starting to his feet and pointing peremptorily to the door. "I know noding of eider of you."

"I say, you did really rob me, you know," put in Bunny. "You lived in Hammersmith then; you can't have forgotten."

"Fritz," screamed the German furiously, rushing towards the door. But Blackstone was before him, barring the way, so that he was forced to return, crestfallen, to the sofa. "Vell, vat you vant?" he said sullenly, trying to straighten his shirt front, which had suffered in the late struggle.

"First of all, tell me all that you know of the Indian gentleman who left the music-hall in your company."

"Dat is easy," sneered Weissman. "I know noding about him. He meet me and Fritz in de music-hall; ve drink togedder; den he drive vid us so far as Hyde Park Corner; den he leave us; dat is all vat I know."

"But I say, you know!" Bunny exclaimed, "that's not quite true. Your hansom passed me at the end of this road, and I heard Geegee's voice distinctly. He asked to be put down there, and you persuaded him to come on and have a whisky at your house."

The German shifted his seat uneasily, and bit his lip. He was plainly disconcerted. Blackstone was just wondering what new lie the man would invent, when the door opened and Fritz entered, closely followed by a stout woman, resplendent in a tea-gown of sky-blue material, with a fall of bright, yellow silk from throat to feet. Despite the barbaric splendour of her costume and the coating of powder and paint upon her face, Bunny recognised the coarse features and thick lips of "Leeza," the woman who had sat upon him that never-to-be-forgotten night in the purlieu of Hammersmith.

Weissman sprang to his feet with a cry of relief. He made the new-comers sit beside him upon the sofa, and proceeded to lay the case before them.

"Leeza! Fritz! Have you seen an Indian mister? Dere is vun in de house, so dey tell me."

"What nonsense you do talk, to be sure," said the woman, with a broad grin. "We ain't a 'ome for Moores and Burgesses, nor nothink o' the sort."

Blackstone insisted. "I wish to know what you have done with my friend."

Weissman shouted, "I know noding about him, I tell you."

"You've told so many lies this evening that I'm not going to believe you just yet."

Fritz whispered some question in Weissman's ear, and a long explanation ensued, in the course of which Weissman suggested something which made the others grin—a very sinister grin, but transient. For want of anything better to do, Bunny fell to observing the features of the drunkard upon the divan. At length Weissman rose, assuming a conciliatory manner.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, making Blackstone an elaborate bow, "you know too much; derefore, ve vill tell you all. It vill not make much difference. Vat you say, Leeza?"

The coarse-featured woman had laid a hand, naturally red, now leaden with powder, upon his arm. She whispered something in his ear.

"Ach, so," he cried, turning to Bunny with a chuckle, "I vun time had de pleasure to show to dis mister de vay to Sout Kensington. Fritz and me likewise help him to disguise himself as a beggar. Dat vas in Hammersmit. Many dings happened since den. Ve vere poor den—very poor. Now ve are rich. Ve have left Hammersmit for a more aristocratish neighbourhood. Ve try to forget all vat happen in Hammersmit."

The drunkard upon the divan raised his head and stared stupidly across the room.

"'Ammersmith," he murmured. "'Oo said 'Ammersmith? Beashly low plashe. She's engaze t'another—shwell—rabbit-mouth. I am trazeman's son—aware facsh. But 'ave feelingsh!"

Bunny pulled Blackstone's sleeve excitedly.

“It’s that cad Jones, the fellow who insulted Milly!” he whispered.

Weissman gave vent to an evil chuckle. “Dis is kvite a reunion of de old friends, eh, Fritz?” Fritz grinned, showing his broken rows of yellow teeth like fangs. The other turned to Blackstone. “Herr Jones is a friend of yours? He is likewise a friend of ours. How shveet to meet de dear friend in unexpected house!”

“What d’yer want?” hiccuped the drunken man. “Jonesh me!”

“I know you,” Blackstone said, stepping across to the divan, and staring down into the ex-minister’s face.

Mr. Jones’s eyes were closed once more. “Never sheen you nall my life,” he murmured, as his head fell forward.

“Look again,” said Blackstone, shaking him.

“No, I shay, no—none of that!” he hiccupped, with vacant, staring eyes. “Throwin’—chap—about! I know yer tricksh! Thought shumthin’ wrong—moment—shaw—nigger!”

Blackstone let go his hold, and confronted the trio upon the sofa.

“I’ve found out from our friend here that the Indian gentleman is in this house. Bring him to me at once!”

There followed more whispering between Weissmann and Fritz, while Blackstone and Bunny awaited the result with what patience they could muster. Mr. Jones relapsed into torpor, was lifeless save for an occasional snore with a hiccup in it. In the grate one solitary ember gave out a feeble glow—all the rest was cold and ashy. At length both the Germans rose, and the spokesman exclaimed:

“Come, misters, bot’ of you! Ve vill take you to your Indian friend.”

Blackstone shook his head decidedly.

“No, thanks. We’re not going to trust ourselves with two notorious blackguards. One will be quite enough.”

Weissmann sneered. "Ach, you are afraid! Vat you dink ve going to do you? But, ven you are afraid, I will send Leeza to guide you. Perhaps you have no fear vid a voman. Go, Leeza!"

The woman rose, and, with a contemptuous glance at Blackstone, passed out of the room. The two adventurers followed her to the hall, where she stayed to light a candle, and then led the way down a passage and some steps, until they entered the kitchen.

"There!" she said, with a chuckle, pointing to the door of a cupboard, "'e's in there! It's the larder, but there's nothink in it 'cept him!"

"Well, bring the light nearer, and I'll soon fish him out," said Blackstone.

In her haste to obey the woman very clumsily let fall the china candlestick, which shattered upon the floor.

Blackstone muttered, "Fool of a woman! Strike a match, Bunny! We can't wait to pick up the pieces!"

Bunny obeyed. The match flared up, throwing a dim light upon their immediate surroundings, leaving the corners of the kitchen still in darkness. The woman was leaning against the table, her hand pressed to her side. She seemed greatly amused at their discomfiture, though what she could find to laugh at Bunny was at a loss to guess. He was aware of a faint creaking sound, as if some person were making his way stealthily downstairs.

Blackstone had opened the door of the larder, and was peering in.

"Now, young 'un, where are your wits?" he cried. "Bring the light nearer!"

Bunny had barely time to light a second match before the first burnt his fingers. He moved forward to the door of the larder, keeping the flame well forward, the better to light Blackstone in his search. It was a small closet, surrounded with wooden shelves, the lowest shelf little more

than two feet from the ground. At the far end, above the topmost shelf, was a tiny window fastened with a latch.

"Here he is!" exclaimed Blackstone, kneeling to examine a bundle of clothes, which had been thrust under the bottom shelf. "What a beastly shame! They've bound and gagged the poor old heathen!"

At that moment Bunny received a violent push from behind—so violent that he fell forward, striking his head against a corner of the woodwork. The door was slammed to and locked. Then came the sound of derisive laughter, mingled with the rumble of furniture, as heavy weights were pushed against the door.

"Ha, ha! You dam vell stay dere till morning! ve vill not be here den! Oh, no! Herr Jones vill be here. He pays de rent and he have to answer all de kvestfons. Ha, ha, ha!"

Blackstone thundered, "You d—d scoundrel, I'll be even with you yet!"

Trampling upon Bunny's prostrate limbs, he dashed his whole weight against the door, but to no purpose. The kitchen door banged, there was a sound of hurrying feet in the passage and upon the stairs, and then all was quiet.

"I say, Bunny, are you much hurt?" asked Blackstone, remembering his friend's condition.

"Nothing to speak of, you know! I say, I think my head's smashed, that all!"

"Got any more matches?"

"Yes, here you are!"

By the light of a match Blackstone stepped over Bunny's legs and knelt down beside the coloured gentleman.

"Got a knife, youngster?"

"No."

"I daren't try to untie the gag for fear of throttling the poor heathen. Let's have a look round!"

By the light of a second match he surveyed the shelves.

A small chunk of cheese upon a plate was all that the larder contained of provisions. But beside it was a table-knife, which Blackstone immediately clutched, and proceeded to apply to the release of the coloured gentleman. As the cold steel came in contact with the victim's left ear, a strong shudder pervaded the fawn overcoat. The legs kicked feebly, much to Bunny's discomfiture; for, the larder being small, every movement involved collision. Then the knot was cut and the bandage removed, much spitting being the immediate result. From the sounds which came from under the shelf it seemed that Brown Geegee was trying to cleanse his mouth from some foreign and unpalatable matter.

"Please to cut the rope at my wrist, Blackstone!" he spluttered. "My mouth is full of dam-satan cotton-wool! Ugh!"

Blackstone was obliged to handle the knife very gingerly, lest he should wound his dusky friend. But at length the cord was severed and Brown Geegee was free.

"Please to turn me over on my stomach, Blackstone!" he gasped. "Lying thus upon my back I cannot get rid of the nasty, evil stuff which is in my mouth. My hands are quite useless. They are simply lumps of deadness!"

It took some time to adjust the coloured gentleman to his satisfaction, but the change of posture was at last effected, and he ceased from spluttering.

"It's all gone now, I think!" he exclaimed. "I never thought that cotton-wool could be so filth-unsavoury! You are my very good friend, Blackstone. I thank you for coming so heroically to my rescue. I desire to clasp your hand in friendship!"

"Gammon!" rejoined Blackstone impatiently, and producing a handkerchief from his pocket he set to work to make a bandage for Bunny's head, adjuring his patient to keep still while he tied it.



The pressure of the handkerchief apprised Mr. Lee-Stretton of a bruise on his forehead, which, to judge from its throbbing, seemed to have swollen to at least twice the size of the parent head. Blackstone tied an unskilful knot, which fretted the patient's left ear. Altogether he enjoyed less ease after the bandaging than before, and the prospect of spending some hours upon the cold boards in his present plight was far from agreeable.

Blackstone sat down, hugging his knees for compactness' sake.

"Now, Geegee, tell us how you came here!" he said.

A snarl came from under the shelf.

"I met them in the music-hall, and they told me they were respectable Count-fellows, so we had a drink. Then I came with them in a hansom to this house. Moreover, they said they would give me a glass of whisky to prevent the catching of a cold. It was all a nasty-evil trick. When I got into the room I had no whisky whatever. I found the Jones friend of my dear beautiful Miss Woodward asleep upon the sofa, and I went up to him in order to clasp his hand in friendship. But before I could pay him my courteous compliments, those wicked fellows caught my arms and held me tight, while a dam-nasty-abomination woman took away my watch and chain and my diamond stud. I bit, and kicked, and swore all I knew; but it was no good.

"Then a bell rang, and they pushed me into a dark room, and one stuffed cotton-wool into my mouth, and tied a handkerchief tight to keep it there, while another bound my arms with string. Then the two men went out, and I was left in the darkness, with only the nasty woman alone. Then I heard the sound of fighting outside the door, and your voices, which I knew. But my mouth was full of cotton-wool, and I could not speak nor make any sound. I heard you go into the room where my friend, Mr. Jones,

was asleep, and then the woman—the strongest woman in all the world—opened the door and pushed me quick on to the landing, where one of the Counts was kneeling, rubbing himself, and groaning all over with pain. Then they hurried me down here and put me into this filth-unsavoury place. That is all.”

Bunny exclaimed, “I say, Geegee, old boy, you’ve had a narrow escape, you know,” whereupon Brown Geegee muttered:

“Ah, the evil filthmen! Wait till I get at them with my pocket-knife! Meanwhile, I spit upon them in the spirit. Do you know, Blackstone,” he resumed, “I have an idea that these are the very same satan-men who robbed my friend Bunny many months ago.”

“What an ass you are, Geegee! Have you only just found that out?”

Brown Geegee snarled. “They are very wicked devil-chaps! I wish I could get at them! I would spit upon them, and I would dig them in their eyes with my pocket-knife!”

There was silence in the larder for some minutes. Then Blackstone wondered aloud what Sammy would say when he found them missing.

“He’ll warn the first person he meets—probably his wife—against the perils of chronic alcoholism,” said Bunny, with a pained chuckle.

Blackstone laughed at this sally, and the glowing end of Brown Geegee’s cigarette moved in weird sympathy with a gurgling sound which proceeded from the smoker’s throat.

Then it was that the thought of the window as a possible means of escape first came into Blackstone’s mind. Bunny was forthwith ordered to strike a match, and Brown Geegee, creeping from under his shelf, joined the others in their somewhat despondent survey of the tiny opening.

"Look here, image," said Blackstone abruptly, "do you want to get out of this place?"

"Yes, certainly, yes! I shall be overjoyed to breathe once more the sweet-balmy-sugar air of freedom!"

"Then squeeze through that window and get a little undiluted fog into your lungs."

The coloured gentleman spread out his hands in deprecation.

"It is a satan-small window; but I will try. Where is my hat? Oh, the fool-wicked chaps have stolen my new silk hat!"

Not only did Blackstone and Bunny show little concern for the loss of their friend's head-gear; but they advised him to divest himself also of his overcoat, which would, they said, be a hindrance to him in jumping to the ground. They each laid hold of a sleeve of the fawn garment, and pulled thereat, until the coloured gentleman stood shivering in his thin dress-clothes. Then Geegee was hoisted upon Blackstone's shoulders to the topmost shelf of all. He opened the window and peered cautiously out, his teeth chattering with the cold.

"What are you waiting for?" asked the baronet impatiently.

Brown Geegee muttered, "It is very dark outside. I cannot see the ground. Moreover, it is ice-freezing-chilly. Besides, perhaps there is a man out there with a gun!"

The match-box was handed up to him, with a warning to be sparing of its contents, and he peered out once more.

"Ah, now I see the ground," he said. "It is quite close—so close that I did not before notice it. There is a bush just under the window. Ah, the aperture is very small. Will someone please to give me a push?"

There was a sharp cry of pain, as Blackstone brought his strength to bear with both hands upon the coloured

gentleman's shoulders. Then came the rustle and thud of a body falling among bushes.

"Are you all right?" cried Blackstone.

"All right," was the reply; "only very much bruised and scratched and damaged. You are my very good friend, Blackstone, but you are likewise a naughty fellow to push me so violently. What do you desire that I do next?"

"Go to the nearest house and see if there's a light in any of the windows. If there is, knock and ring till somebody comes. If there isn't, go on till you come to a house where there is."

"But how am I to find my way out? It is still very foggy."

"Bear to the right, and keep straight on till you come to a gate, or some railings, and then climb over. There are houses on all sides, so you can't very well go wrong."

"You might throw me my overcoat; it is ice-freezing cold."

The fawn overcoat, thrust in bundle form through the window, reached the ground in due course, and was gratefully acknowledged by its owner.

"Don't go playing any tricks, Geegee," said Blackstone, in a tone of warning. "No cutting home to Sammy's and leaving us in the lurch."

"You are my friends and I love you. Upon my sacred word of solemn honour, I will not fail you in the hour of your distress."

So Geegee passed out into the night, leaving his friends not without misgivings as to his worthiness of the trust placed in him. To the prisoners, sitting together in the darkness of the larder, minutes seemed hours; their doubt of Brown Geegee had grown to suspicion, and suspicion to certainty, long before the wished-for rescue came. But, in truth, half an hour had scarcely elapsed before the coloured gentleman redeemed his promise.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### OF THE DEVIL AND HIS WILES.

MISS MILLICENT WOODWARD was far from being in the best of spirits, those dark November days. Indoors, whether at home or at the office, she found the artificial light trying to her eyes ; but there was no means of escape, save a plunge into the choking yellow fog of the streets, scarcely less trying to the temper.

She dressed in the morning by the light of a candle, and joined Percy in the gaslight of the breakfast-room. Then came a groping walk to the railway station, twenty minutes in a crowded compartment of the underground, then a hurried jostling through city streets, with, perhaps, a friendly push from a policeman at the crossing, and then comparative comfort in the electric light of the office.

A deep-drawn sigh of relief was now the usual form of greeting among the young ladies, as they hung up their hats and cloaks in a little closet set apart for the purpose. "This dreadful fog!" they exclaimed one to another. "It's blinding! It's choking! How I found my way from the station, I don't know! It's like night." And then they would sit down at their respective desks, and set to work for dear life until one o'clock, when they repaired to lunch—a slice of cake and a glass of milk, in most cases—in the dazzling halls of the *Æ*rated Bread Company.

It had been Millicent's custom, time out of mind, to take lunch at the same table with her friend, Rose Langley; and this custom was the cause of much jealousy among the

other girls. Hailing from the south-eastern and northern suburbs, the latter were prone to resent any symptoms of "standoffishness," on the part of the only two whose address ended in a capital W. Moreover, the report ran that Miss Langley had high connections. The ease which her maiden aunt enjoyed—thanks to an annuity, which would die with her—was magnified, in the mouth of rumour, to vast wealth. There were even hints of a distant cousin in the House of Lords. Not one of the girls but longed to be on intimate terms with Rose; and all agreed in resenting that young lady's infatuation with Millicent, as a personal grievance.

"Birds of a feather flock together," said one of these malcontents, with the contemptuous curl of a full red lip. "Did you ever see such conceit in all your life? We're not good enough for them—oh, dear, no!"

"A couple of dressed-up madams!" said another, with a sneer, all the feathers and bows in a peculiarly ornate hat quivering with disdain. "As if they didn't work for their living the same as we do. Really, dear, the way that Milly Woodward carries on—well, some people may call it respectable, but it's not my style."

Such criticisms as these passed at lunch-time, when the subjects were well out of ear-shot. Openly, the girls had nothing but smiles and endearments for their comrades of the aristocratic west. They be-deared and be-darlinged Rose and Millicent with the utmost effusion, made tender inquiries as to their health, and hoped roguishly that "he" was quite well.

"You are not looking so well this morning, dear! I shall have to write and tell *him* to take more care of you!" or "What a colour you have! I should like to know what *he* has been saying to brighten you up so!" were common greetings among these girls, the "he" referred to being that attendant and expectant swain which each young lady

made it a point of honour to have, or to say that she had, in attendance.

Milly, whose satellite had been observed in the corridor upon more than one occasion, came in for a large share of these innuendoes. Neither she nor Rose had so much as an inkling that they were objects of jealousy to the other girls, or that their friendship was much discussed and criticised in the brief leisure for conversation afforded by lunch-time.

It was on the third day of the dense fog, when the two friends were lunching at their own particular table by the window, whence a view of a near street-lamp—a patch of pale lemon haze amid the fog—and nothing else was obtainable, that Rose handed a note to Millicent.

“It’s from my aunt,” she said; “she wants you to come home with me to supper to-morrow evening. If it’s at all foggy you’re to stay the night. I won’t hear of a refusal. I’ve asked you so many times and you’ve never been able to come. This time I got auntie to write, so that you should have no loop-hole of escape. You can show the letter to your mother, dear, and she’ll be sure to give you leave.”

Millicent tore open the envelope and glanced through its contents.

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” she said. “My mother’s an invalid, you see, and she counts on a talk with me in the evening.”

“Your brother will be there, you know,” pleaded Rose. “It isn’t as if Mrs. Woodward would be alone.”

“I see no reason why I shouldn’t accept,” said Milly, “but I can’t let you know for certain till to-morrow morning.”

Rose said, “There’s a dear,” taking the final consent for granted.

Their cake and milk being long since disposed of, they paid at the desk and went back to their work.

The other young ladies nudged each other and tittered spitefully, next morning, when it became known that Millicent was to sup and stay the night at Miss Langley's home. Yet when five o'clock came and the friends set out for the station they were loud in their wishes of a "pleasant evening," adding a hope that they would not "get run over or anything in that dreadful fog."

This hope was uppermost in the minds of the two girls when, half an hour later, they emerged from the oppressive, sulphurous depth of the Underground into the yet more oppressive fog, which hung like a pall over the upper world, and stood trembling upon the edge of the pavement outside High Street, Kensington Station. After many false starts, some clutching at one another's arms, and not a few engaging little screams, they launched out into the gloom and reached the opposite side without mishap. After that all was easy, for the region of Campden Hill is at all times remarkable for the scarcity of wheeled vehicles, and Rose could have found her way to Hertford Gardens blindfold.

The aunt—a slender, white-haired old lady of benevolent aspect—met them at the door, her face expressive of relief.

"My dear Miss Woodward, how do you do!" she said, holding Millicent's hand in hers. "I have heard so much of you from Rose that it is a great pleasure to me to make your acquaintance. How cold you are! I can feel your hand like ice through your glove. Come to the fire and get warm before you go upstairs to your room. I was getting quite anxious about you, fearing you might have lost your way in this darkness. Sit down, my dear, and get warm."

Milly sat down and, drawing off her gloves, stretched out her hands to the blaze, while the old lady chatted away in her pleasant, gentle voice about the fog, how it would get into the house in spite of all her care to keep doors and



windows closed, how choking it was, and how it left a sooty deposit upon everything.

Then the two girls went upstairs for half an hour, and came down to supper, fresh and dewy from their toilet. They stood demurely while the old lady murmured a long grace, which was repeated, with very little change in the wording, at the close of the meal.

“I hope it didn't bore you very much—the grace, I mean,” whispered Rose, as they adjourned to the drawing-room. “Auntie always will make it so long. I've tried to get her to learn a shorter one—in fact, I spent quite a lot of time collecting short graces for her approval. But she would have none of them, because they made no mention of the devil!”

Millicent wondered very much at this, but she made no remark for fear of hurting her friend's feelings. Now that she came to think of it, the grace had been neither more nor less than an elaborate prayer against the wiles of the Adversary, seeming to indicate a fear lest the Arch-enemy of mankind should condescend to play tricks with the victuals. Indeed, Satan was the bugbear of the elder Miss Langley's life. Brought up in an evangelical school to a belief in an omnipresent, ultra-personal, evil spirit, her limited imagination invested him with the qualities of a mischievous schoolboy. He was ready for any prank, from pulling her lace cap awry, or snatching the food from her mouth, to setting the house on fire. He lurked in the dark places of the stairs, ready to clutch at her legs as she went up to bed. For the like purpose he lay hid among the bushes of the little garden whenever Miss Langley ventured out after dark, and only the diligent humming of a psalm tune enabled her to elude his grasp. In the daylight she was less nervous of his presence; but when night fell and darkness was about the house—well, was not one of his titles the Prince of Darkness?

Unaware of the true state of the case, Millicent received her friend's apology for the grace in mystified silence. She glanced, not without awe, at the benignant face of the old lady, who sat with her knitting in an arm-chair by the fire. Surely she could not be a devil-worshipper? Milly was puzzled for a moment; but, becoming absorbed in a game of chess with Rose, the matter escaped her mind.

But when, her cherished plan being frustrated by an unforeseen move on Milly's part, Rose exclaimed, "Oh, bother!" the old lady, who had been dozing over her knitting, raised her head and looked mild reproof at her niece.

"I wish, my dear, you would abstain from senseless exclamations!"

Rose pouted.

"There's no harm in 'bother'!"

"No harm in the word itself, my love. But, as you use it, it is an idle word, and we are expressly warned against idle words, as a special snare of the evil one."

She spoke with a gentle earnestness that was very impressive. Rose bit her lip, seeming to concentrate her attention upon the chess-board.

Millicent began to understand her friend's strange remark about the grace. But she thought Rose a little too ready to scoff at the tenderness of her aunt's conscience. She was such a dear old lady, so kind and thoughtful for others. A wish welled up in her heart that her mother had been a little more like Miss Langley, but her loyalty stifled it at once.

It was long ere Rose, an expert chess-player, succeeded in checkmating her less practised rival; for the moves were but incidents in a confidential chat, and the pieces were often forgotten for minutes at a time.

"Shall we have another game?" she asked. "You didn't have a fair chance!"

Millicent consented. But the new game was conducted on lines even more dilatory than its predecessor. The conversation turned upon men and the ways of men, as exemplified by the admirers, past and present, of either young lady. Each anecdote provoked much laughter, and the fact that such laughter had to be kept within bounds, for fear of disturbing the old lady's nap, only added zest to their enjoyment.

At length the aunt started to wakefulness, saying :

"I fear you have found me a dull hostess, Miss Woodward. Why, Rose!" she exclaimed, catching sight of the clock upon the mantelpiece. "It's eleven o'clock, and the maids will be wanting to go to bed. We must have prayers at once!"

She rang the bell, with the result that the cook and housemaid entered the room, closing the door softly behind them. Miss Langley read prayers very slowly, in a droning voice, incentive to drowsiness, and quite different to her secular way of speaking. Millicent, a devout little figure, with her head buried in an armchair, was half-way to dreamland ere the final amen, and a shuffling of feet and chairs announced that the function was at an end. She rose, rubbing her eyes. The servants had vanished, and their mistress was standing by the table, evidently wishing to say good-night.

Rose pleaded.

"Mayn't we sit up, just this once, auntie, to finish our game of chess?"

"You know what a difficulty there always is about getting you up in the morning, dear! But, perhaps, just for this evening—in consideration of Miss Woodward's visit."

The unselfish old lady, who always challenged Satan to single combat by going to bed last of the little household, to make sure that all was safe, picked up her knitting once more, and straightway fell a-dozing in her easy-chair.

The long hand of the clock upon the mantelpiece was drawing near to its smaller comrade and the awesome hour of midnight, when a knock resounded through the house—a single knock, abrupt, as if the visitor, alarmed at his own temerity, had suddenly let go the knocker.

“Bless my soul! what’s that?” cried the old lady, clutching wildly at the arms of her chair.

“You shouldn’t use idle words, auntie!” said her niece reprovingly. “I’ll go and see what it is. Please come too, Milly! I own to feeling a little creepy myself!”

The old lady listened to the opening of the front door, which was followed by exclamations of surprise, and a flow of what sounded like bad language with an apologetic ring in it. Then the door was shut, and the two girls returned, ushering a grotesque figure into the sitting-room.

Miss Langley started to her feet. Her face was pale, her eyes round with horror.

“It is Satan himself!” she faltered. It needed all the force of a rigid, Protestant upbringing to restrain her from crossing herself.

The figure made an elaborate bow, and a pair of bright almond eyes leered ghastly upon her from the puckers of a dusky face. Its sleek, black hair was dishevelled, and its brown hands were spread out in deprecation. It wore a long fawn garment of eccentric cut.

Milly said nervously: “This is Mr. Geegee, a friend of mine.”

The old lady shook her head.

“Ah, he has many names!” she murmured.

“He has been robbed and ill-treated,” Millicent was going on to say; but the old lady, slowly recovering from the first shock of the coloured gentleman’s appearance, interrupted her:

“Who and what is he?”

“He is an Indian gentleman—a friend of my *fiancé*.”

He is at present studying for some examination, I think."

"Yes, honoured madam, it is quite true," Brown Geegee corroborated, his hand upon his heart. "I at present read diligently for the Indian Civil Service. Moreover, reverend madam, I have this night been much damaged by nasty-wicked filthmen."

The old lady winced at the epithets. Beginning to realise that the visitor was neither more nor less than human, she begged him to take a seat and explain his business.

Brown Geegee complied, and, with a mirthless grin, took up the burden of his tale. He told, with great volubility, of his abduction from the music-hall, of his discovery of Mr. Jones, and of his subsequent sufferings in the German's house; of the gallant attempt at rescue by Blackstone and Bunny, ending in the darkness of a larder, and a broken head for one of them. He told of his own valiant but painful squeeze through the narrow window, and the words of his mouth jostled one another in his excitement.

"That is all, honoured madam," he concluded. "I came to the first house wherein I saw a light, and whom should I see but my dear beautiful Miss Woodward, whom we all love, standing just inside the door! I beseech your help, respectable madam. You are a kind-good-sweet old lady, and I love you. I beseech your help for my poor friends, who are still in the dam-satan-filth larder."

Miss Langley pressed her hands to her ears.

"Hush, oh, hush!" she murmured, in great distress. "I am sure, sir, that you have spoken in haste. You cannot have reflected seriously upon the meaning of those awful words!"

Brown Geegee grinned from ear to ear in his most conciliatory manner.

"I beg your pardon! It was not my intention to damage you in the least! I ask only that you will help me to

release my wretched friends from the power of wicked-devil fellows !”

“Oh, sir ! I beg you to desist !” cried the old lady. There was a wail for poor humanity in her voice. “I fear that you have fallen into evil company. You own that you have spent a part of this evening at a music-hall. Let your sufferings be a warning for the future. And oh, abstain from vain repetitions and idle oaths !”

“I ask your assistance for my imprisoned friends !” cried Brown Geegee, with an appealing gesture.

Miss Langley wrung her hands.

“What can I, a weak woman, do ? We have no man in the house, or I would send him with you.”

“I will go,” said Millicent, coming to a sudden resolution. And, before the old lady could remonstrate, she was half-way upstairs in search of hat and jacket. Rose followed with the like impetus, so that Miss Langley and the coloured gentleman were left to the embarrassment of a *tête-à-tête*. Brown Geegee was restless in his chair, under the mild, reproving glance of his hostess. His eyes rolled, and his face underwent the most frightful contortions.

“It is very rash of Miss Woodward to undertake this dangerous mission,” she said at length. “I fear that my niece will insist upon accompanying her.”

“I am very sorry,” murmured Brown Geegee, with a cordial grin. “If you like, I will tell them not to come.”

“Too late, I fear. The mischief is already done.”

There was silence between them for some seconds. Then Miss Langley rose and walked across the room to a bookcase. She returned with a small bundle of papers, which she handed to Brown Geegee, saying kindly :

“I think and hope that you will find them a help to you.”

Brown Geegee glanced at the title of the uppermost. It was a tract published in connection with the Zenana

Mission, and could hardly fail to have a beneficial effect upon an Indian gentleman, the old lady thought. There was, besides, the annual report of the mission, with other tracts upon the same subject.

Brown Geegee's embarrassed soul took refuge in a grin—a very complex grin, of long duration. Indeed, he was still grinning at the papers upon his knee when Millicent and Rose reappeared, dressed for a walk.

"I think you extremely foolish to set out upon so dangerous an enterprise," said the old lady sharply. "At this hour of the night, too. It is most inconsiderate of this young man to come to us for help, when there is a police-station within ten minutes' walk."

Brown Geegee, who had never thought of the police, was for acting upon this hint at once; but Millicent stopped him.

"I have very particular reasons, Miss Langley, for wishing to keep all this private," she said. "I have explained them to Rose, and she quite agrees with me."

"But have you thought of the risk you will run in entering a house of ill-repute at midnight? No, Rose, I cannot allow you to go. Go upstairs at once and take off your things. The danger is too great."

"Indeed, Miss Langley, I do not think that we shall run any risk," said Milly. "I mean to go into the house alone, leaving Rose and Mr. Geegee outside. I shall take care to let the inmates know that I have friends at hand to help me if need be. I do not think that they will care to harm me."

"There is something in what you say. Yet I cannot but consider it a rash undertaking—especially for a young girl. It is far from proper, considering that the persons you intend to rescue are of the opposite sex. But my notions are old-fashioned, I am aware. Girls nowadays are very wayward and impatient of restraint."

Milly was earnest in her denial of this charge.

"Indeed, it is not that. One of the gentlemen who is shut up is my *fiancé*; and the other is a—is a very great friend. And there is another reason, which, I have explained to Rose, makes it my duty to go."

The word "duty" rang soothingly in Miss Langley's ears, as the sound of a silver trumpet far away. Her face relaxed and she breathed more freely.

"Of course, my dear, if it is a question of duty I have no right to hinder you. But need you take Rose? She is delicate and very liable to catch cold."

"I'm going, auntie dear," said Rose coaxingly. "You wouldn't have me let Milly go alone. Besides, Mr. Geegee would be so lonely outside all by himself."

She shot a roguish glance at the coloured gentleman, who responded by a fiendish chuckle and a leer of quite preternatural cunning.

"Rose, how can you!" exclaimed her aunt, shocked at her niece's forward conduct. Then, in a more kindly tone "I wish you safe back from the bottom of my heart."

Rose followed Millicent into the hall, with eyes twinkling over her shoulder at the coloured gentleman. Brown Geegee bowed low to his hostess, murmured, "Good-night, respectable lady. Nice dreams!" and hurried after the two girls.

No sooner had the door of the house closed behind them than Miss Langley became aware of a little pile of tracts under the chair lately occupied by the coloured gentleman. Not having as yet attained to the dignity of a Zenana, Brown Geegee had rejected the publications as irrelevant.



## CHAPTER XIX.

OF THE HEROIC ENTRY OF MISS WOODWARD INTO THE GERMANS' HOUSE, WITH MUCH OF KISSING, AND OF THE ILL REWARD WHICH AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN HAD FOR ALL HIS PAINS.

"WHAT number did you say?" asked Millicent, as the three stood together on the pavement, with the fog cold and clammy about them.

Brown Geegee broke out with his wonted volubility:

"It is most unfortunate, but I have not a good memory. Moreover, I do not remember ever to have heard the filth-number of that satan-devil house. It is close by—that is all."

"I know it quite well," said Rose. "It is number seventy-five, only two doors off. I've noticed those Germans lots of times. They are always driving about in hansoms."

Millicent resigned herself to her friend's guidance, with the result that, after some groping and the burning of three of Brown Geegee's wax vestas, they succeeded in finding the right gate. A sudden longing to run away took hold of Millicent. She paused irresolute, the handle of the gate in her grasp. Then the thought of the poor fellows shut up in the dark, cold larder came as a tonic, and she lifted the latch.

"Mr. Geegee, I want you to stay here and take care of Rose," she said. "If you hear me call, please make as much noise as you can, and come to my help. I am not

given to screaming upon slight occasion, so you will be quite justified in breaking into the house."

"Very good. I will stay with Rose. What beauty in the name! How sweet, how fresh, how innocent!"

The owner of the name gave a little laugh. The coloured gentleman amused her very much. He was something between a clown and a monkey in her eyes.

"Mind, I trust you to take great care of Rose, Mr. Geegee!" reiterated Millicent from the doorstep.

"Repose your confidence in me. Rose is a good girl. Moreover, she is beautiful, and I love her!"

With a beating heart she grasped the knocker, and, closing her eyes lest she should see something to daunt her, inflicted a sounding rap upon the door. All was silence in and around the house. No sign or sound of life save the voices of Rose and Brown Geegee conversing in low tones.

A second knock was equally without effect, but at the third—that mystic number, how can we avoid it?—a light appeared in the upper storey, vanished, and, after a short interval, reappeared in the hall.

"'Oo's there?" came a sleepy voice through the keyhole.

Milly whispered, "It's only me," which was perhaps the most natural and insane remark that she could have made. It had the desired effect. A hand was heard to fumble with bolts and a chain, and the door was opened a very little way.

"'Oo's 'me'?"

"I'm 'me,' of course! How silly you are to-night!" she said, hoping to impose upon the sleepy half-consciousness of the janitor.

"Well, 'ow was—I to know?"

The sentence was broken in the middle by a yawn. The door opened to admit of the passage of a human body. Summoning all her courage, Millicent stepped into the hall

"'Oo are you, miss? I don't remember to 've seen you before," murmured the servant, blinking at the visitor. "Lor'! 'ow the fog do find out the weak places in a body!"

The maid shivered as she spoke, and no wonder. She had come straight from bed, with only a shawl thrown hastily over her night-dress to protect her from the cold.

"The Counts is gone out, miss," she continued, wrapping her shawl closer about her. "They was up and down-stairs like mad for 'alf an hour or more, and then I 'eard the back-door bang. I 'spect the Countess 've gone along with 'em, though what they want to go out for at this time o' night I can't think!"

Milly said, "I wish to see Mr. Jones."

"'E's in the drawin'-room, miss. 'E's mostly 'toxicated of a night, and sleeps on the sofa. 'E's never abed afore five or six in the mornin'!"

"Well, show me to the drawing-room at once!"

The maid took her candle from the table and led the way upstairs.

"Ah, it's warmer 'ere!" she said, with a final shiver, as they entered the room. She turned up the gas and looked to the divan, whence came an irregular, snoring sound. "There 'e is, miss!"

It was Millicent's turn to shiver. Could that sodden face, with its unnatural, shiny redness, be the face of the once dapper Harry Jones? Her heart smote her with the thought that her disdainful apathy had brought him to this.

"I wish to speak to him," she said. "Do you think we could manage to rouse him?"

"A dowsin' with cold water might do it, miss. We can but try, as the sayin' goes."

The maid passed, with a shiver, into the adjoining room, and, returning with a bedroom jug, emptied the entire contents over the head and shoulders of Mr. Jones.

"Now I've been and gone and done it!" she muttered

remorsefully. "I always am that thoughtless! There's the couch spoilt now!"

The gentleman on the divan gave vent to a portentous snore, ending in a hiccup and a shudder. He murmured, "Shurrup!" and then, roused by discomfort to a sense of the presence of ladies, added, "Beg—your—par—don!" and "Pril lil dearsh!"

Millicent drew nearer to him.

"Mr. Jones, I'm ashamed of you," she said. "You, who used to be so nice and gentlemanly, to let yourself sink to this."

Harry Jones blinked at her, murmuring, "I beg your par-don," over and over again, until a faint notion that something more was expected of him dawned upon his muddled brain, when he smiled and said, with an effort at distinctness, "I am trazeman's son. Aware of facsh."

The atmosphere of the room was sickly with the smell of spirits; Millicent felt ill, and longed to be away.

"You'd best let 'im alone for a minute or two, miss," said the maid, eyeing the drunkard critically; "the water's bound to sober 'im in time."

Millicent said, "Very well, then. Take me, if you please, to the larder."

"To where, miss?"

The girl's eyes were round and bright with wonder.

"To the larder," said Millicent quietly.

"If it's somethink to eat you want, there ain't nothink there, 'cept a bit o' cheese."

"No, I am not hungry, but I must go to the larder at once. You are in your nightdress and will be cold. Here; wrap this round you." Picking up from the sofa a blanket of many colours, she shook out the folds and flung it deftly about the girl's shoulders. "There, that covers you nicely."

“Beggin’ your pardon, miss, you makes yerself pretty free for a stranger.”

Millicent had long since made up her mind that the servant must know the truth; so she repeated all that was essential of Brown Geegee’s narrative, the girl filling up every pause with a gasp and a “Well, I never!” It was very evident that she had been kept entirely in the dark with regard to the means by which her masters gained their living.

“And to think o’ the gentry bein’ shut in my larder, of all places!” she exclaimed. “And me not scrubbed it for more’n a week. This way, miss.”

With that, she snatched up the candle, and led the way downstairs as quickly as the tripping length of her blanket would allow.

“I don’t think your masters—the Counts, as you call them—will come back to this neighbourhood again,” said Millicent, as she followed.

“No, ’taint likely. And a good riddance, too. Mr. Jones ’e pays the rent. The Counts was always a-borrowin’ money off ’im. And ’e’ll ’ave to pay me my wages to-morrow. I won’t stay in this ’ouse another day—as true as I stand ’ere, I won’t.”

Arrived in the hall, Millicent bade her guide wait a minute, and hurried to the door. The fog poured into the passage with the density of smoke.

“Rose,” she called.

“Yes, what is it, dear?” Two forms, linked arm in arm, loomed through the fog. “Mr. Geegee has been making me laugh, until I hardly know where I am.”

Milly explained. “There is no danger whatever. The Germans have run away, and poor Mr. Jones is hopelessly drunk. I’m just going down to the larder. You’d better come in out of the fog.”

“What, there’s more of you, is there?” the maid ex-

claimed, as Millicent closed the door behind the newcomers. She gave a friendly grin of recognition to Brown Geegee, setting him down in her mind as "one of these 'ere nigger chaps," whose antics had delighted her when she had been privileged to pay a tripper's visit to Margate.

She led the way along the passage and down the steps, the voluminous folds of her gaudy blanket giving her somewhat the appearance of a Red Indian squaw. A pair of carpet slippers flapped off and on her feet at every step.

"Ah, that is the place," cried Brown Geegee excitedly, pointing to a pile of furniture in one corner of the kitchen. "Bunny, Blackstone! my very good friends. I am come! I am here!"

A deep halloa came from behind the barricade.

"There's no time to be lost," said Milly; and the three set to the work of demolition with a will, removing the obstacles one by one, while the maid stood by, holding the light. At length the kitchen dresser, the foundation of the pile, was pushed aside, and the door was laid bare.

"The key is there! The key is there!" cried Rose Langley.

An adventurous soul by nature, the events of the night had strung her nerves to the highest pitch of excitement.

Brown Geegee was stepping forward to do the unlocking, when there came a sudden, violent thud, and the door flew open, coming in vivid contact with the thin, bony nose of the gallant rescuer, who was hurled back against the dresser, yelling with pain. Rose flew to his side.

"Are you much hurt? Oh, poor fellow, poor fellow!" she cried. And, in a moment she had the coloured gentleman folded in her arms, fondling his head upon her bosom.

"Oh, Rose! What would your aunt say?" cried Millicent, horrified. But her horror found no further vent in words, for, before she had time to look round or expostulate,

a pair of moderately strong arms were about her in a bear-like hug, and a rabbit-mouth was pressed again and again to her cheek.

“Well, I’m blowed. I suppose I’m meant to go for the woman in the hearth-rug!” said Blackstone, reviewing the situation. “I broke open the door, and yet I’m the only chap who hasn’t got a girl to make a fuss of him.”

The maid looked a modest invitation, but the baronet was indisposed.

“When you’ve done, Bunny,” he continued, “and when the other young lady has quite finished with Geegee, I fancy it’ll be about time we cleared out of this.”

Bunny’s attention wandering for a moment from the matter in hand—in arms, to be more accurate—Milly seized the opportunity to wriggle herself free, and made haste to entrench herself behind the dresser. About the same time, Brown Geegee declaring himself much better—small wonder, for he had enjoyed the best of medicine—Miss Rose suddenly awoke to the fact that she had been behaving in a somewhat unmaidenly fashion. She withdrew to Millicent’s side, blushing and whispering :

“I couldn’t help it, dear ; indeed, I couldn’t ! When I saw that poor, dear, comical little darling get such an ugly knock, I pitied him so.”

Millicent did not answer. She was still breathless from her struggle with Bunny. Moreover, she was not a little indignant.

“So silly of Douglas !” she thought ; “and before Mr. Blackstone, too.”

Though why the simple fact of Blackstone’s presence should discompose her so, was not very clear at the time, even to herself.

“But I say, you know !” cried Bunny. “It’s too bad ; beastly hard on a fellow, I call it !”

“Who or what is ‘beastly hard on a fellow’ ?”

she asked, mimicking him in her most aggravating manner.

"You are!" he retorted, with a grin. "Now, perhaps, you won't mind telling a chap how you got here?"

Millicent told the story in few words, Rose adding a few more by way of foot-note.

"I say, you know!" Bunny exclaimed. "It's the rummiest coincidence ever I heard of."

Millicent looked steadfastly at her adorer and laughed merrily.

"I beg your pardon, Douglas, but you do look so funny with that handkerchief tied round your head. The ends are hanging down over your ear. You can't think what a sight you are!"

Blackstone surveyed his handiwork with a certain pride.

"I tied that bandage," he said. "Not bad for a beginner—eh?"

Millicent dropped her eyes demurely.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Arthur; I had no idea that it was your doing, or I should not have presumed to criticise it."

"I wonder what that's for?" Blackstone thought. "Treats me like a stranger all at once."

He felt her retort as a snub, and fell to wondering what he could have done or said to deserve it.

"But I say, you know!" Bunny broke out in indignation. "What's wrong with you to-night, Milly? You don't seem to care a bit that I've been and cut my head open—beastly painful it is too, I can tell you—but you go into fits over the bandage. If you think you could tie the thing better yourself, come and do it."

Geegee moaned, "Oh, oh," holding his handkerchief to his nose. "It bleeds, it bleeds; my handkerchief is all over bloodiness. Oh, who will lend me another to stop the nasty-devil streaming?"



Rose, in the prodigality of her compassion, handed him a dainty square of cambric, edged with lace, one of her choicest treasures.

"We'd better be clearing out of this," said Blackstone, who had all this time been leaning moodily against the larder-door, viewing the weirdly-draped person of the maid and light-bearer with a curious eye. "Here's a girl with nothing but a hearth-rug on—and that doesn't cover her ankles--shivering like anything. She'll catch her death of cold, if we keep her here much longer."

The reference to her bare ankles crimsoned the cheeks of the maid. She tried to drag down the blanket so as to cloak her extremities, and, in so doing, revealed a broad shoulder, shrouded in the white garment of the night.

Blackstone took a malicious pleasure in the girl's confusion. "I was wrong when I said that she had nothing but a hearthrug on," he announced deliberately. "She has got on something white underneath."

"It's too bad of you!" cried Milly indignantly. "She has been such a help to me, too! I won't have her bullied, Sir Arthur!"

Blackstone smiled placidly. "Won't you? Then I won't say another word to her. I had to do something, you know, to remind you people that it's past one o'clock, and we've all got to get home."

"I think Mr. Jones 'll be pretty sober by now, miss," proffered the servant. "If you still wishes to speak to him, that is."

"Would you mind coming upstairs and helping me, Sir Arthur?" said Millicent. She looked naturally to Blackstone for support, who had dealt with Harry Jones so ably upon a former occasion. Sir Arthur bowed his readiness.

Bunny interposed. "But I say, you know, mayn't I come too? I can't have Blackstone poaching on my preserves!"

Millicent winced, and Blackstone cursed Bunny in his heart for a fool.

"There is no reason why you shouldn't all come," she said. "I only asked Mr. Blackstone because I thought—at least I remembered—"

"That's better," Blackstone interrupted, enjoying the warmth of the mere mister, and anxious to forestall any allusion to his former prowess. "Come along! I'm awfully sorry about that door, Geegee! Cheer up, old chap! It might have been worse, and, anyway, you've behaved like a true Briton to-night."

Brown Geegee's eyes twinkled with delight, and his mouth expanded to a gleaming smile. He forgot all about the pain and the big purple swelling where his nose was won't to be. Offering his arm to Miss Langley, he followed the rest of the party upstairs—a subtle joy tugging at his dusky heart-strings.

"Well, I never thought to see such goin's-on in my kitchen," said the maid, as she led the way with the candle, speaking over her shoulder to Milly. "It does a body's 'eart good to see folk a-kissin' and a-'uggin' like that. But I've a likin' for big men myself, I must say. I declare, when I see that there giant come burstin' out of my larder, like Samsing in all his glory, you could 've knocked me down with a feather, though I say it as shouldn't!"

But Millicent only smiled, and said, "Please go on!" She was hampered in her movements by the eccentric conduct of Bunny, who made frequent grabs at her from behind, and succeeded once in kissing the nape of her neck.

## CHAPTER XX.

IN WHICH THE DRUNKENNESS OF MR. JONES, THE FLABBINESS OF RAW MEAT, THE JEALOUSY OF MR. LEE-STRETTON, AND THE STRANGE CONDUCT OF AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN ARE DULY SET FORTH.

WHOSOEVER has beheld a seal fresh from his gambols in the brine basking, wet and shiny, upon a rock or the asphalt margin of the basin in the Zoological Gardens, his eyes, maudlin with a clumsy pathos, blinking in the light of day, his moustache dank and dripping—whosoever has seen this, I say, will have some notion of Mr. Jones, sometime traveller in the bedstead line, as he appeared when the cooling effects of his shower-bath began to counteract those of the alcohol within him.

A growing consciousness of discomfort moved him to change his position upon the couch, to roll over with his face to the wall, and, finding no relief in that posture, to sit up. But, sitting up, the whole room began to swim round and round inside his head, and his head began to dilate to admit of the proceeding. Whereupon, with something between a moan and a hiccup, he threw himself face downward upon the couch in such a position that he could keep at least half an eye upon the revolutions of the room and its furniture. He was lying thus, blinking at the gas, the very picture of the seal before-mentioned, when the maid entered, followed by Millicent, Rose, and the attendant swains.

“Well, I’m—” exclaimed Blackstone, remembering that

ladies were present. "He looks pretty bad, eh, Miss Woodward?"

Millicent's underlip quivered, and her eyes were dim. She was thinking of the dapper Harry Jones of only a few short months ago, who used to leave a bunch of flowers for her every time he called at the house; of the honour of whose friendship Percy was won't to boast—"a man who drives his own gig, and spends his holidays in Switzerland." She could hear him saying it. How long ago it all seemed, and oh, how pitiful such memories contrasted with the figure of degraded manhood before her. Since Douglas had come into her life everything had gone wrong somehow. Yet this was certainly not Douglas's fault; neither could she, looking back, see how she could have played her own part otherwise.

Oh, why did men take love so seriously? What direful charm was there in her, a mere girl of flesh and blood like himself, to drive a man to ruin?

Had Mr. Jones been in a state to analyse his feelings, and, having analysed, to express them in words, he could have told her that it was her being flesh and blood, even as he, that maddened him. She, whom he had worshipped from boyhood, whom he had all his life hoped to possess, had given all that priceless treasure to another, which might so easily have been his. It was as if a tantalising Fate had placed her almost within his reach, had allowed him to gaze upon her beauties, from the warm splendour of her hair to her dainty feet enshrined in the most distracting of boots. And then, just as he had stretched out his arms to draw her to him, a figure had stepped between—a grotesque figure, with low-crowned billycock set rakishly upon its head, and trousers turned up in disdain of some imaginary mud, which strode forward with a rickety swagger, holding its walking-stick by the ferrule, and switching the calf of its leg from time to time with the

handle thereof. Fate, aided perhaps by some hereditary tendency, had driven Mr. Jones to seek refuge in drink and bad company. Even to the confusion of his sodden brain, it must have been evident that Millicent had nothing to do with it.

Yet she could not hold herself altogether blameless. She might have been kinder to him in the past, she thought. She ought to have told him, years ago, that she could never, under any circumstances, be his wife. Then, ere it had been too late, he might have ceased to think of her, might have become happy with some other girl, who felt not the want of aitches, and revelled in the smell of pomatum. Her eyes were brimming with tears as she turned away from contemplating the seal-like form upon the divan. She looked to Blackstone appealingly, as much as to say, "What can I do?"

Bunny, a very Argus where his beloved was concerned, whose perceptions were further sharpened by that old smouldering jealousy of Blackstone, saw the gesture and the appeal, and his soul was troubled.

"You might tell a fellow what you mean to do, Milly!" he exclaimed, in an injured tone; adding, in a whisper for her ear only, "I say, you know! What's up with you to-night? You don't seem a bit pleased to see a chap!"

"Don't whisper, you silly boy!" she said, with a pettish shrug of her shoulders. "I can't hear a word, and besides, it tickles!"

And she tried to laugh merrily, while tears for Harry Jones blinded her eyes.

"Well, what do you wish done with this man Jones?" Blackstone asked.

"I—I don't know," faltered Milly, swallowing a sob. "I want to get him to give up this horrid drinking and—and be like what he used to be. But he doesn't understand me when I speak to him."

She hid her face in her hands, and sobbed outright. Bunny, himself deeply moved, though he had not the least idea what was the matter, blurted :

“ There’s nothing to cry about, you know ! I’m all right. My head doesn’t hurt much now, and Geegee’s nose is lots better ; isn’t it, Geegee, old boy ? ”

Blackstone longed to kick the speaker, though he could have given small reason for the yearning within him.

“ Oh, my dear, beautiful, sweet, amiable, sugar Miss Woodward ! ” cried Brown Geegee, “ do not weep, I beg ! ”

The maid was convulsed with laughter.

“ That’s right, sir ! ” she said. “ You give her some o’ your tricks to cheer ’er up, poor dear ! ”

Brown Geegee rolled his eyes, leering horribly upon the damsel. She seemed to be talking nonsense, but her tone was of admiration, and he loved at all times to be admired by persons of the opposite sex.

Rose Langley put her arm about her friend’s neck, reminding her in a whisper that her aunt was sitting up for them at home, and that, if they wanted any sleep, they must go at once to bed, for the night was fast wearing away.

“ Milly ! ” came a husky voice from the divan. “ Beg—your—par—don ! ”

At the same moment, diving off the couch with some hazy, quixotic purpose of helping a lady in distress, Mr. Jones collapsed in a heap upon the carpet, groaning and blubbering.

“ Look here, Miss Woodward ! ” said Blackstone hurriedly, “ you’d better go home to bed at once ! ”

“ Yes, Milly, that’s just what I say, ” Bunny chimed in. “ It’s not a fit place for you, you know ! ”

“ I feel as though it were my fault, somehow, ” said Millicent, her handkerchief to her eyes.

Bunny, who had no sympathy for Milly's rejected lover, recommended a "jolly good horse-whipping" as the most salutary measure that could be adopted in Mr. Jones's case. Brown Geegee, rubbing his swollen nose, suggested that he should be "damned even unto deadness." But Millicent still looked to Blackstone for advice.

After a moment's reflection, he said :

"I really think you'd better go home, as Bunny says ! If you will allow me, I'll come round and see about Jones first thing in the morning. Trust me to do the best for him !"

"Yes, that'll be best, miss !" said the servant, shivering, despite her blanket. "I'll be glad to get back to bed myself, though I says it as shouldn't. And I'll see that Mr. Jones stays in until the gentleman calls in the mornin'."

"Well, then, that's settled !" said Blackstone, checking a yawn as he spoke. "Come along !"

But although his exhorting them to come along would seem to imply a desire to lead the way, he was, in fact, the last to leave the room.

"Go on, Bunny !" he whispered, as Mr. Lee-Stretton passed out in the train of his goddess. "Don't wait for me !"

"But I say, you know—"

"I must see to this man. He'll have an apoplectic fit or something, if we leave him on the floor."

So saying, Blackstone closed the door and stepped across to where Harry Jones lay.

"Look here, Jones, old chap !" he said. "Pull yourself together and get up !"

Mr. Jones tried to raise himself upon his hands, but after a brief and futile struggle fell back, with an insane chuckle, to his former prostration. Without more ado, Blackstone stooped down and, seizing him under the armpits, lifted him to a standing posture. He then supported

him to the inner room and, having groped about for the bed, laid him upon it and left him. Preparing to make his way downstairs, he was surprised to find light instead of darkness, and the blanket-clad maid awaiting him in the hall, candle in hand.

She smiled alluringly upon him.

"I was to say that your friends is gone to number seventy-one, two doors down on this side." Then, sinking her voice to a whisper, she added, "There's a cask o' beer in the cellar, and there's a cold leg o' mutton in the pantry, that's just askin' to be ate, if so be as you're 'ungry!"

Blackstone burst out laughing.

"No, thanks. Good-night!" he said, and hastened to make good his escape. He heard the servant say, "Well, I never!" in an injured tone. Then the door slammed between them, and he was in the chill, blind fog.

"Number seventy-one," he muttered. "I wonder which way it is! I should like to see her again, just to say good-bye! But it's pretty well hopeless."

Surely there was witchcraft abroad that night. Not the conventional witchcraft, of old hags in steeple-crowned hats sailing on broomsticks athwart a pallid moon, with bats and ravens in attendance; but an up-to-date witchery, transforming every-day people and things into the characters and scenery of something between a Bab Ballad and a problem novel. On an average night, Blackstone might have wished for ever for a chance of saying good-bye to Miss Woodward, and have been not one jot nearer to the object of his heart. But to-night, some wizard seemed to hear his wish and, snatching up Brown Geegee from somewhere in the depths of the fog, wafted him through the air—astride his ivory-handled cane presumably—to the doorstep of number seventy-five, just as Blackstone had given up all hope of seeing Miss Woodward for many a long day to come.

In short, no sooner had the wish passed his lips, than a



weird shape loomed through the fog and a husky voice said :

“Is that you, my very good friend?”

“Why, Geegee, old man! I thought you'd gone long ago!”

“So I had!” began Brown Geegee volubly; “but my dear, beautiful Miss Woodward, and my sweet, delightful Rose sent me here to show the way to the house, which is quite close—”

“Cut it short, heathen!” said Blackstone joyously. “Show the way first, and tell me about it afterwards!”

“Ugh, those satan-devil fellows!” cried Brown Geegee, smiting the gate with his cane, as they passed out. “When I get hold of them, I will stab them with my pocket-knife!” He slapped a pocket of his overcoat, in which the knife may be supposed to have been secreted. “I will stab them until they are all over deadness. Then I will spit upon them!”

He made a lunge at the railings as he finishing speaking. Blackstone laughed.

“Come on, Geegee, and don't make an ass of yourself! I must make haste and thank Miss Woodward for coming to help us.”

Brown Geegee was disposed to sniff at this, feeling the remark as a slight upon his own prowess. But suddenly some droll memory stirred within his brain, causing him to chuckle.

Blackstone stared at him in some alarm for his sanity.

“What's up?” he asked.

“Oh, ho, ho! He, he, he! Ah, ha, ha!” laughed the coloured gentleman. “There is an old lady with white hair who spoke to me like a priest, and tried to make me believe that the Germans were not satan-devil-wicked fellows. Moreover she gave me a bundle of papers all

about the Zenana Mission. She said she hoped it would do me good! Ah, ha, ha! He, he, he! Oh, ho, ho!"

Blackstone, really beginning to fear that the strange events of the night had unhinged the mind of his dusky friend, applied the only remedy in his power. Grasping Brown Geegee by the collar of his overcoat, he shook that ill-starred Oriental until all the laughter was gone out of him.

"No, Blackstone, no! Do not assault me!" he faltered, as soon as the power of speech was restored to him. "Even little beastly worms will turn!"

"Don't talk rot, then! Where's the house?"

"This is the house!" said Brown Geegee sulkily, turning the handle of a gate. "This is where the old lady lives!"

"What old lady?"

"The old lady I was telling you about, who gave me papers of the Zenana Mission!"

"What's that?" asked Blackstone, his hand hovering in the region of the velvet collar, ready to resume its hold should the coloured gentleman give the least sign of madness.

"The mission to Zenanas!"

"Mission to bananas, indeed! What rot!"

The velvet collar was again seized, and its unfortunate owner would surely have undergone a shaking even more severe than the last, had not the door of the house opened, and Rose Langley appeared on the threshold.

"Oh, what are you doing?" she cried in dismay. "Poor Mr. Geegee! After he has taken so much trouble, too!"

Blackstone let go his hold of the collar, feeling a little ashamed. He would have liked to explain to Miss Langley that his apparent ill-usage of the coloured gentleman proceeded from no unkind or hostile feeling on his part, that for years he had been in the habit of shaking Geegee, and that Geegee himself rather liked it than otherwise. But,

remembering Miss Langley's sympathy for the coloured gentleman's sufferings upon a former occasion, he thought it best to apologise to Geegee, to explain that he had not meant to hurt him but only to do him good, which was the plain, unvarnished truth. And he fell to twirling his moustache to hide his confusion.

Rose coughed behind her hand.

"Won't you come in?" she said. "My aunt is getting some supper ready for you. Do please make haste, or the house will be full of fog!"

Having closed the door behind them, she led the way into a sitting-room, where Millicent and her betrothed were trying to warm their feet upon the fender, although the fire was quite out. A tray, draped in a white napkin and garnished with a cold round of beef, a cruet-stand and some plates was upon the table. Blackstone had barely time to take stock of these preparations ere Miss Langley entered, carrying a cluster of knives and forks as if they had been a bouquet of rare flowers.

Millicent presented Sir Arthur Blackstone to her hostess, shyly and with many blushes. The old lady hastily laid down her knives and forks to welcome the baronet.

"I am so thankful that you have escaped unhurt," she said. "You must be in need of refreshment, I think. I must ask you to waive ceremony in consideration of the lateness of the hour. Rose, my dear, kindly do the honours of the table, while I look for some arnica for the foreigner's nose and the other gentleman's forehead. Yes, my dear, raw meat *would* be better, but I fear we have none in the house. However, I will go and see!"

She went out of the room on her quest—truly brave of her, when we come to think that Satan was lurking in all the dark places—while Rose set to work to carve the beef. The result of her first attempt being a chunk of quite preternatural thickness, she was relieved by Blackstone,

who managed to perform his office with greater regard to economy.

Now that all excitement was over, everybody was seized with a desire to yawn, especially Brown Geegee, who yawned even at the moment of eating, much to his own discomfiture. At length the old lady re-appeared with two slices of raw liver upon a plate, at sight of which ghastly poultice both patients shuddered, and Geegee, having his fork in his mouth at the time, all but swallowed that weapon.

Bunny protested. "But I say, you know! I can't really go about with that stuff on my forehead!"

The coloured gentleman gasped, shuddered, opened his mouth to speak, and then, remembering the courtesy due to his hostess, grinned ruefully, but held his peace.

"It will do you good, you know!" Millicent said coaxingly to Bunny. "Besides, I assure you, Douglas, you cannot possibly look funnier than you do at present, with the ends of that bandage lopping over your ear!"

"All right," said Bunny, with an amorous glance. "I say, I don't mind having the stuff on my forehead, if you'll arrange it and tie the bandage for me."

Blushing very much, and shooting furtive side-glances at Blackstone to see what he thought of it all, Millicent unfastened the clumsy knot, and, deftly laying the sanguine liver upon the swelling, tied it on with the handkerchief. Miss Langley and her niece performed the like good offices for Brown Geegee's nose, giving to that gentleman the appearance of some Turkish beauty, his eyes shining like twin stars above the temporary yashmak, which hung loose over mouth and chin.

"Is that comfortable?" Milly and Rose asked almost simultaneously of their respective patients.

"Not exactly," said Bunny, who, his tongue in his cheek,

was fingering the new-made bandage uneasily. "It shuts up my left eye, you know."

Brown Geegee exclaimed :

"It is filth-flabby, this satan-raw meat !"

Miss Langley knit her brows.

"Oh, how can you use such dreadful language ! After your lesson of to-night, too. For shame, sir."

Brown Geegee's eyes twinkled with apology. The yashmak providentially concealed his grin.

"You must excuse him, Miss Langley," Blackstone interposed. "He's only a heathen, you see, and that's his way of talking."

He went on to say that they had already trespassed too long upon Miss Langley's hospitality, that it was time they started for home ; and, as no one was found to gainsay the truth of these statements, there was a general pushing back of chairs, and shaking of hands, followed by a movement to the door. Out in the passage, Bunny kissed his betrothed, and Rose shook hands with Brown Geegee, whose lips murmured sweet sugar nothings beneath his yashmak, while his eyes leered frightfully above it. Then Rose shook hands with Blackstone, and hoped that he was not very tired, with a suppressed yawn implying that she was. Millicent, in her turn, was going to shake hands with Blackstone, when Miss Langley suddenly emerged from the sitting-room, with a bundle of papers in her hand, and bore down upon Brown Geegee, who shrank before her.

"You forgot these papers, sir, upon a former occasion," she said. "They can hardly fail to be of interest to a gentleman of your nationality. No, sir,"—in answer to a deprecatory movement of the coloured gentleman—"you need have no scruple in accepting them. They are of no further use to *me*."

Brown Geegee's eyes leered ghastly—just such a look as one would expect to see in the eyes of some wretched

prisoner of the Inquisition, when asked politely to put on the thumb-screws. He accepted the papers, and placed them under his arm. Then Rose opened the door, and the coloured gentleman shuffled forth into the fog, followed more sedately by Bunny.

“Good-night,” said Blackstone, staying to shake hands with Millicent. “By the way, how’s the pup?”

“Oh, it’s the dearest thing in the world,” she said.

“You shouldn’t say that. It can’t surely be dearer than Bunny, for instance.”

“That’s asking questions. Good-night. Please don’t forget to let me know about poor Mr. Jones. And—and you’ve never once called to see for yourself how the bulldog is getting on.”

“All right,” said Blackstone, releasing her hand. “I won’t forget. I’ll call one of these evenings and smoke a pipe with your brother, if you’ll allow me.”

“I—allow you! *Percy* will be delighted, I’m sure. Good-night.”

“What were you talking to Milly about?” asked Bunny, as the three launched out into the fog on their return to Sammy’s. “Deuced confidential you seemed, too.”

“Oh, I was only asking after the bull-pup I sent her,” said Blackstone, forgetting for a moment that Bunny knew nothing of his part in the gift.

Mr. Lee-Stretton stopped short, his face crimson under his bandage.

“The bull-pup—you gave her. I say, you know, Blackstone, this is too much of a good thing. She’s my girl, not yours. What right have you to give her presents, and make up to her without my knowledge?”

“Don’t make an ass of yourself,” said Blackstone soothingly. “I gave her the pup after that affair with Jones, as a protection. As for making up to her—I haven’t tried to see her from that day to this. It wouldn’t be much good

trying, I'm afraid. Any fool can see that she's awfully gone on you."

Bunny was softened.

"I say, Blackstone, old chap, I'm awfully sorry I flared up like that; but it was so sudden, you know. I don't wish to be conceited, but I really do think she's a bit fond of me, don't you?"

"Can you doubt it?" said Blackstone, slapping his successful rival upon the back. "If she were not, I tell you candidly, I should try and cut you out. But it's no good, and so I have to content myself with the prospect of being a friend of the family, god-father to the first-born, and all that sort of thing. You'll allow me that consolation, won't you?"

"Rather," said Bunny, with a gratified chuckle. "Hallo, Geegee, what are you up to?"

Brown Geegee had fallen behind, and was now dancing about like a maniac, stamping upon the pavement with all his might.

Blackstone shouted, "Hold hard, Geegee! What's the row?"

The coloured gentleman made no direct answer, but continued to stamp with all his might.

"You nasty-devil-filth-satan papers!" he muttered, as if the words had been of incantation, and himself a dusky wizard. "I will trample you even to nothingness."

"What is it, Geegee?" asked Blackstone impatiently.

Brown Geegee echoed derisively:

"What is it? You inquire, what is it? I tell you it is the wicked mission to Zenanas; it is the silly-evil papers that the old woman gave me!" And he stamped even more wildly than before.

"Surely nobody was ever fool enough to start a mission to bananas?" Blackstone appealed to Bunny. "Geegee must be mad!"

“Not bananas!” cried the coloured gentleman, chuckling grimly—“Zenanas! Zenanas are a sort of collection of women!”

“Ah,” murmured Blackstone, shaking his head, “I understand. Daresay they need it.”

Then as Geegee still kept on stamping as furiously as ever, he cried:

“No more of your foolery! Come along!” and the three friends pursued their way through the fog, keeping close to the railings for guidance.



## CHAPTER XXI.

IN WHICH MR. THOMPSON IS CONCERNED AT THE INTIMACY OF ONE OF HIS PUPILS WITH A FEMALE, AND SIR ARTHUR BLACKSTONE GOES UPON AN ERRAND OF MERCY.

THE sun rose out of Shoreditch, and its first rays struck sidelong, gilding towers, steeples, and chimney-pots of the great city, even unto Kensington. The fog lay low and dense along the streets, seldom rising above the roofs of the houses. To the man in the Monument, or to one looking down from the cross of St. Paul's, or—and this is more to the purpose—from the tower of the Imperial Institute, it would have seemed as if the houses, churches, and public buildings, the river with its many bridges and all the shipping of the Pool had been packed carefully for the night in cotton-wool, lest they should jostle against and break each other, as the world rolled on its course through space. The sun rose, and little wisps and fluffy clouds began to detach themselves from the mass, floating upwards and melting away. Then the rays fell slantwise into the streets, striking at the very heart of the fog, which grew less and less dense, until, by nine o'clock, there was no fog at all, but only a luminous haze, opalescent with the sunlight.

It was a frosty winter's morning, bright and invigorating. The rime sparkled on area railings, on the pavement, on the roofs—everywhere that it could find a resting-place. Policemen walked their beats with swinging arms, slapping their chests, as cabmen do, to keep the blood in circulation. The milkman, handing in his cans at the gate of Mr.

Thompson's house, blew a warm cloud upon his fingernails, and remarked to the red-armed maid that it was seasonable weather; a proposition to which the girl, with the prospect of some icy scrubbing before her, gave a grumbling assent.

If the weather, as is often supposed, has weighty influence upon the well-being, and especially upon the temper, of mankind, surely here was a morning to put the most surly into good humour with himself and therefore with the rest of the world. Yet Mr. Thompson, who, far from being surly or ill-conditioned, was the most peaceable and peace-loving of men, was inclined to be irritable that morning. There is an influence upon the lives and tempers of married men more potent even than the weather. Mrs. Thompson had been awakened about four o'clock by the noise of heavy feet upon the stairs. She had been further disturbed by the opening and shutting of three doors, and by other sounds, from the flinging of boots into the passage to the creaking of a bed, as its occupant disposed his limbs for sleep. She had thereupon roused her husband, who was inclined to snore peacefully through it all, and had improved the five hours before breakfast by dinning into his sleepy, fuddled brain the necessity—the solemn duty, she called it—of bringing the culprits severely to book. So when about half-past nine Blackstone entered the classroom, it was to find his tutor awaiting him, an unwonted frown upon his wrinkled face.

“Good-morning, sir,” said the baronet, going over to the fire-place and ringing the bell for breakfast. “Jolly weather, isn't it?”

“Umph, umph!” snorted the little old tutor. “Er—yes, very fine weather! But what do you mean, sir, by—er—in fact, by coming in at an unseemly hour this morning? I—er—cannot allow it! This—er—this must not continue. Such behaviour will bring my house into—er—

into evil repute in the neighbourhood. You are a nice, gentlemanly young fellow—very! But I cannot allow my house to be brought into evil repute. It would be—in fact, it would be most unpleasant for Mrs. Thompson.”

Blackstone held out his hands to the fire.

“I’m awfully sorry, sir,” he said; “but last night it wasn’t exactly our fault.”

He went on to tell of the carrying-off of Brown Geegee, and their consequent adventures in the German’s house.

The tale was not half told when Brown Geegee shuffled into the room, his nose swollen out of all proportion to his face. He shivered as he noticed the rime sparkling upon the window, and the winter’s sunlight throwing a pale, rippling gleam upon the dusty wall, and he moved his carpet slippers with all speed to the fire.

“Er—what is the meaning of this?” asked the tutor, with an indignant sniff, pointing to Geegee’s nose.

“I was coming to that, sir,” said Blackstone, and went on with his story.

When he was in possession of all the facts, Sammy grunted fiercely.

“Humph! I—er—I must speak to Mr. Lee-Stretton—nice, gentlemanly young fellow—very seriously. He appears to have become entangled with a very undesirable—er—person. I had occasion to warn him, upon his first arrival here, against—in fact, against all females. There are lots of dressed-up creatures in this neighbourhood, who have no bowels of compassion where nice gentlemanly young fellows are concerned. He will have to pay damages, I fear—er—heavy damages.”

Brown Geegee, basking in the congenial warmth of a roaring fire, leered horribly at his tutor out of the corners of his eyes.

“Oh, no, sir,” he said. “My dear Miss Woodward will not damage him in any way whatever. She is such a good

girl!—such a sweet-sugar girl! We all love her. Moreover, she is his engaged-betrothed *fiancée*."

The tutor snorted excitedly.

"Er—what, what? Engaged, did you say? This is—er—this is even worse than I suspected! What—er—what will his parents say? They will hold me responsible for his folly, and—er—" with great vehemence, "imbecility, when, in fact, I could do nothing—nothing."

At this point, a servant bringing in the coffee-pot and a dish of fried bacon, the two pupils sat down to breakfast.

"Mr. Blackstone," said the tutor, preparing to take his leave, "will you have the—er—the goodness to let me know when Mr. Lee-Stretton comes down? I must speak to him as soon as possible—er—that is to say, before I forget."

"I'm going out directly after breakfast, sir," said Blackstone, "and I can't say when I shall be back. But Geegee 'll see to it. Won't you, Geegee, old boy?"

The coloured gentleman sputtered with his mouth full:

"Yes, I will see to it."

"Er—thank you," said Sammy. "But—er—let me tell you, Mr. Blackstone, if you go on shirking your work in this way, you can never—er—never hope to pass your exam."

Blackstone laughed. "I haven't got one to pass. I'm on my own hook now, sir."

"Ah—er—dear me! dear me! How forgetful I am!" muttered Sammy; and he passed snorting from the room, closing the door behind him.

Left alone with the coloured gentleman, Blackstone said:

"What an ass you are, Geegee! Why couldn't you hold your tongue about Bunny's engagement, when you knew it was a secret?"

Brown Geegee snarled, "I didn't know. If he desires that she be kept a secret, why does he walk about with her

in public places? A secret should be kept in a satan cupboard or a cellar. It should not walk about in broad daylight."

It was no good arguing with him, Blackstone thought. He was a heathen, and could not be expected to understand things like a Christian. So he ate his breakfast in silence, the coloured gentleman keeping watch out of the corners of his eyes lest his stalwart neighbour should change his mind of a sudden and "go for him."

At length Blackstone rose and pushed back his chair.

"Well, I'm off," he said. "Come part of the way with me, Geegee, old boy?"

Brown Geegee grinned and seemed pleased, but shook his head, nevertheless.

"I must really study diligently this morning to make up for last evening. I have a great desire to pass well in my exam."

Blackstone shrugged his shoulders.

"You know best, of course; but I really think you overdo it, old chap. You'll get brain fever, if you don't look out."

Brown Geegee expressed his readiness to take his chance of brain fever by rubbing his hands together, chuckling low down in his throat, and grinning from ear to ear. He did not cease from these gleeful demonstrations until the door closed behind his fellow-pupil, when he drew his chair close to the fire, put his feet on the fender, and, holding out his hands to the blaze, set to work to get thoroughly warm before beginning his studies.

Meanwhile Blackstone had passed out into the street. There was vigour in the keen, frosty air which smote his nostrils with a sting, sending the blood coursing and tingling through every vein. Inertia, laziness, boredom were impossible on such a morning. He struck the red pillar-box at the corner a ringing blow with his stick; not

that he had any grudge against that particular letter-box, but from sheer excess of vitality, which made it necessary to strike a blow of some sort.

There was beauty—near akin to ugliness, but still beauty—in the long vista of houses—the beauty which sunshine and shadow, with a bluish haze in the distance, can give even to stuccoed respectability. It was matter of rejoicing that colour was at last returned to the world after the dun interval of fog. The sight of a red omnibus with yellow wheels in the High Street, not to speak of divers hoardings, papered with crudely-coloured advertisements, gave to Blackstone a sensation of pleasure which was quite new to him. He had heard Bunny tell how Millicent would fall into rapture over everyday things—a sunset, for instance, or a flower; and it pleased him to think that he could now sympathise with her to the extent of a red omnibus with yellow wheels. From the height of that omnibus he could now look down upon Bunny, as upon a man of no artistic perceptions.

As he turned into Hertford Gardens, an Italian was grinding a popular air out of a street piano. To the trained ear of a mere bundle of human nerves, each note would have been a separate agony; but this young barbarian, brimful of health and life, found the music—he never doubted that it was music—distinctly invigorating, and gave the man a sixpence as he passed.

He found it hard to recognise the scene of his recent adventures in the little square house, whose gate bore the number seventy-five. The fog and darkness of the previous night had invested it with the terrors of a nightmare. Now, in the bright winter's morning, it was just like any other house in the same road. The maid was scrubbing the doorstep as he turned in at the gate. The fulness of her admiration for big men seemed to have passed away with the fog, for she only answered, "Yes, sir," to his inquiry

whether Mr. Jones was within, and her grin of recognition was of the faintest. "'E's in the drawin'-room, sir."

Blackstone did not wait for her to show the way, but strode in at the open door, climbed the stairs, and entered the room. The red plush furniture looked more tarnished, and was even more suggestive of the lounge of a public-house by daylight. Harry Jones was lolling in an easy-chair by the window staring aimlessly out. He rose to meet the visitor, holding out a flabby hand.

"Well, how are you?" Blackstone asked, eyeing the patient critically. "Not up to much—eh? Try some soda-water."

"I've drunk pints of it already," said Mr. Jones wearily, passing his hand over his forehead. "I say, I must apologise to you, sir, for my conduct of last night. I'm afraid I made a beast of myself, but I can't remember—there's lots I can't remember." Again he put his hand to his forehead. "Maria tells me that you and your friends were ill-used in this 'ouse last night; and that Milly Woodward was in this very room, and that rabbit-faced fool, and a lot more; but I can't remember. I seem to 've dreamt somethin' o' the sort. All I remember is your puttin' me to bed, and that seems like a dream."

"Of course you can't remember," said Blackstone cheerily. "Why, man, you were as drunk as a fish."

"And Milly Woodward saw me like that?" Mr. Jones turned away his face.

"Yes, and she was awfully sorry for you—seemed to think it was partly her fault—and asked me to come and look you up this morning, to see what could be done."

Harry Jones cried vehemently, "There's nothing to be done! I'm a ruined man! She don't love me, you see, and she's the only girl I ever cared one 'ang about. I'm a ruined man, I tell you!"

“Nonsense! You can’t be much older than I am. Pull yourself together, man, and make a fresh start.”

“Oh, it’s all very well to talk! You’ve never been in love with a girl and thrown over for another, or you wouldn’t speak like that.”

“Look here,” said Blackstone, leaning forward and speaking very seriously. “I’m in exactly the same boat as yourself. I’ve never confessed as much to anyone; but you seem to think you’re the only man who’s hopelessly in love with a girl, and it may do you some good to know that you’re not. I’m awfully in love with Miss Woodward—have been, ever since I first saw her; and yet I have to keep my feelings to myself, because she’s engaged to a friend of mine—the fellow with the rabbit mouth you spoke about just now.”

Harry Jones pushed back his chair, surveying his visitor with a strange mixture of wonder, alarm, and admiration.

“By gum, though, I shouldn’t so much mind if it was you she was engaged to. But that idiot! I say, Mr.—I don’t know your name—would you mind shakin’ ’ands, as we’re in the same boat, you know!”

Blackstone complied at once with this request.

“Cheer up! There’s nothing to mope about,” he said. “Anyway, taking to drink and making a beast of yourself is hardly the way to make her feel sorry she got engaged to somebody else.”

“By Jove, though, I believe you’re right!” said Harry Jones, a dawning hope in his little grey eyes. “I say, Mr.—I don’t know your name—you’re a good sort and I like you. Will you stay and ’ave some lunch with me? It’ll be lonely else, now that the German’s ’ve bolted.”

Blackstone consented, and to save Mr. Jones further hesitation in the matter of the name, he gave him a card.

“By gum!” Reading the title Mr. Jones became more vulgar than ever in his self-abasement. “This is an honour,



sir, a great honour for a plain man like me. I am only a tradesman's son, sir—"

Blackstone broke in hurriedly :

"The more credit to you if you make your way in the world. Come, Jones, shake hands again and let's agree to do the best with our lives for Miss Woodward's sake. I never was so energetic in my life as I've been since I fell hopelessly in love."

Harry Jones accepted the proffered hand, murmuring :

"You do me a great honour, I'm sure, Sir Arthur Blackstone."

"Now, what do you propose to do, Jones?" pursued the visitor, in his most friendly manner. "Can you get back into your old line of business?"

"No, no! not that, sir, not that!" cried Harry Jones, in agitation. "They wouldn't 'ave me back again, and besides, it'd remind me too strongly of what might 've been."

He paused, and then, seeming to remember something, started to his feet and began to pace the room with fierce strides. His hands were clenched and his teeth set.

"I'm a ruined man," he said at length, stopping before Blackstone and speaking in a low, despairing tone. "What a fool I 'ave been! All this furniture you see 'ere was procured in my name and 'asn't been paid for. This 'ouse is taken in my name, and I've lent those Germans pounds and pounds which I shall never see again—never!"

He sank back into a chair, burying his face in his hands.

Blackstone looked at him thoughtfully for some moments, his chin upon his hands, then he rose, and slapping Mr. Jones upon the shoulder, said :

"Cheer up, man! It isn't as bad as all that. What's the amount? I've got more money just now than I know what to do with. Perhaps you wouldn't mind accepting a loan?"

Mr. Jones started up and shook him warmly by the hand, protesting that he was a true friend if ever there was one, but that he (Mr. Jones) could not be so far beholden to him. However, by dint of insisting and reminding him of the compact between them, Blackstone forced the ex-traveller in the bedstead line to name a sum which he thought would cover all the liabilities.

“It isn’t that I ’aven’t got any money,” Harry explained; “it’s that what I ’ave is all tied up by my father’s will and I can’t get at the capital without no end of fuss, and then only a little at a time. You’re a true friend, sir, and I’ll never forget your kindness. But I’ll pay you back in instalments—upon my word I will.”

“Well, that’s all right!” said Blackstone, settling himself once more in his chair; “now, what do you propose to do?”

Mr Jones put his hands to his forehead, ruffled up his hair, bit his underlip, and made other preparations for deep thought. He remained thus for more than a minute, frowning at the pattern of the carpet. Then his brow relaxed, his hand fell with a loud slap upon his knee, and he raised his eyes to Blackstone’s face.

“I have it!” he said. “There’s a cousin o’ mine—name of Twinkler—keeps a tobacco shop down Fulham way. ’E wishes to extend ’is business, I’ve ’eard, and ’d be glad to find a partner who could put a little money into the concern.”

Blackstone stroked his moustache pensively.

“That sounds all right. How much capital did you say your cousin wanted with his partner?”

Harry Jones reddened to the tips of his ears.

“No, no, sir! Don’t think of it, I beg! I’m be’olden to you enough already. I can arrange with my cousin, Twinkler, about payin’ the capital in instalments. ’E’ll be only to glad to keep it a family concern.”

At this point the maid knocked at the door, and, with something of defiance in her voice and manner, asked to speak to Mr. Jones for a minute.

"You can say what you've got to say 'ere, Maria!" said her only remaining master, fearing to face her alone in the passage.

"Yes, I *can* say it 'ere!" retorted Maria, folding her arms; "but seein's as it's business, and shameful business, too, I thought you mightn't wish to 'ave it mentioned before the gentleman. What I 'ave to say is this—and I'd say it before all London and suburbs if they was 'ere—what I 'ave to say is that I'll thank you to give me my wages, Mr Jones, and 'ard-earned wages they'll be, a-servin' a lot o' rapsCALLIONS and gutter-snipes, though you was always the best of em and a kind master I will say.

Harry Jones winced and his face became very red. A scene like this would have been disagreeable at any time, but that a baronet—the only baronet whose hand he had ever shaken—should see him at such a disadvantage was in the last degree humiliating. Had he been alone he would probably have retaliated. As it was, he could only blush and falter:

"A month's notice was the agreement, I believe."

"Yes, sir, that *was* the agreement, I believe!" said Maria, tossing her head, and smiling sarcastically at the houses across the street. "But what notice did I 'ave of the doin's of last night? What notice did I 'ave that robbery and thievin' and murder was goin' on in this 'ouse? If you call yourself a gentleman, Mr. Jones, you'll give me the full month's wages, and no bones about it!"

Harry Jones was disposed to temporise.

"Well, well! It can't be very much. When did the Countess pay you last?"

The maid waxed scornful. She appealed to the houses

across the street to "listen to 'im," meaning Mr. Jones. She repeated: "When did the Countess pay me last? When did *she* pay me last, indeed? Not one single copper penny"—here she struck the forefinger of her right hand upon the palm of her left for emphasis—"not one single penny of wages 'ave I 'ad since I came to this 'ouse, three months ago come Friday three weeks. When did the Countess pay me? Why, when I asked her for money, it was 'Ho dear! don't come botherin' me! Mr. Jones, 'e pays everythink, and 'e's 'ard up jess now!' That was all I got for my pains. And now"—she raised her voice to a half-hysterical scream—"I'll thank you for my wages, Mr. Jones!"

With a face of blank dismay, Harry began to turn out his pockets; but Blackstone stopped him, saying, "Leave this to me."

"How much is owing to you?" he asked, turning to the girl.

"Three pound fifteen shillin's!"

Blackstone took out his pocket-book and handed her a five-pound note.

"There you are," he said. "Now go away, there's a good girl! Can't you see that we are busy?"

But Maria was not to be got rid of so easily. Now that she was fully paid, with a handsome present besides, she felt it her duty to apologise to Mr. Jones for her former tirade, and to express her willingness to remain in the house, so long as he should have need of her services. She hoped that he would let bygones be bygones, for—she said this with tears in her eyes—he had always been a kind master to her; winding up a pretty lengthy harangue by assuring both gentlemen that she came of honest parents and was not used to such doings, otherwise she would never have so far forgotten her place as to demand her wages, as she had done that morning. Both her hearers uttered a sigh of

relief when the door at length closed behind her. But the relief was somewhat premature, for she was back again in a minute, having forgotten to say that lunch had been on the table nearly half an hour.

Harry Jones led the way downstairs, trying hard to remember that he was host, and to do the honours as a host should, feeling all the time like a guest, and leaving a great part of the honours to be done by Blackstone.

“Now, Jones,” said the latter, setting to work upon a plate of that identical mutton of which he had been invited to partake upon the previous night, “I am very curious to know how you came to be so friendly with those German rascals.”

Mr. Jones scratched his head thoughtfully.

“It’s rather a long story,” he said. “You see it began on that night of the Debatin’ Society, when first I ’eard that Milly Woodward ’ad given ’erself to another. I went out with ’em after that and stood ’em supper, and, bein’ reckless, drank more than was good for me. Then the next night I met ’em again, and so I slipped on from bad to worse.”

He went on to tell how, by dint of flattery, they had wormed their way into his confidence, until at last they obtained complete mastery over him, and he became as wax in their hands. They had persuaded him that it would be best for all parties if he came to live with them, sharing the cost of housekeeping, and had taken this house in Hertford Gardens—an expensive one—in his name. He had been very angry when he came to realise their true character and profession; but they had threatened to tell his former friends of his cowardly assault upon Millicent, and so kept him quiet. Upon one occasion they had decoyed him, when drunk, into taking part in one of their robberies, and had overcome his after-scruples by hints of what they could tell if they chose. In despair he had taken to drink more

and more, seeking relief from the constant disgust of the wretched life he led.

Blackstone listened with deep interest, feeling vaguely that his own life-story might have been very similar, but for a few accidents, trifling in themselves. Here was a man, who had lived a reputable life up to a certain hour of a certain day; and then a misfortune, a chance meeting, had started him upon the downward road.

“All that is past and done with now, Jones!” he said, clasping the ex-traveller’s hand across the table.

Harry Jones returned the pressure with glistening eyes.

“Yes, sir, I ’ope so! You’re a true friend anyway, and I wish from the bottom of my ’cart that you could ’ave Milly Woodward! There’s not the man in England I’d say as much for!”

## CHAPTER XXII.

IN WHICH SIR ARTHUR BLACKSTONE HARBOURS DOUBTS OF MR. LEE-STRETTON'S VERACITY, AND IS AMPLY REWARDED FOR THE PAINS HE HAS TAKEN.

It was past three o'clock in the afternoon when Blackstone took his leave, having first exacted a promise from Mr. Jones that he would leave the whisky-bottle alone that evening.

"Take care of him, there's a good girl," he said to Maria, as she opened the door for him to pass out. "He's down in the mouth, and wants looking after. If you could manage to hide the whisky somewhere where he won't find it, I should be awfully obliged to you."

Maria grinned and curtseyed. She had been very collapsible in his presence since the episode of the five-pound note.

"Yes, sir, I'll see to it! 'E'll be lonesome, poor dear, all by 'isself, I shouldn't wonder! I'll tell him to ring the bell if so be as 'e wants company."

Once in the street, Blackstone set out for his tutor's at a brisk pace, happy in the consciousness of having done a good day's work. He would go home, write a note to Miss Woodward of his success, and would take it round to St. Christopher Avenue at once. He would get there before she returned from business, so that Bunny might have no ground for jealousy should he hear of the visit. But so dense was the throng of women in Kensington High Street, so erratic were their movements, and so little regard

did they show for the rule of the road in their frantic endeavours to butt and elbow each her way to the shop-windows, that he was obliged to go very slowly for fear of collision. Even thus, one elderly lady, walking backwards from the presence of a silken gown, brought the handle of her umbrella into sharp contact with his lowest rib, and, looking round indignantly, straightway dropped her parcels, expecting him as the aggressor to pick them up. So it happened that the streets were already stained with red from the sun-setting when he reached his tutor's door. Not wishing to disturb the other pupils at their work, he went upstairs to Sammy's study to crave the loan of writing materials. Mr. Thompson was sitting in his arm-chair by the window, dozing as usual, a book open upon his knees. He awoke with a snort as Blackstone entered.

"Er—good afternoon. Is there anything that I can do for you?"

Blackstone explaining his need of pen, ink, and paper, the tutor graciously, and with many sniffs, gave him leave to write his letter then and there, pointing to a little table wedged between two bookshelves, whose surface was a very Sahara of dust and papers. Blackstone sat down and tried his pen upon the back of an envelope.

"Well, sir, have you spoken to Bunny yet—Lee-Stretton, I mean?"

"Er—yes, oh yes! I have spoken to him very seriously, and he has—er—has explained everything to my satisfaction!" The tutor raised his glasses to his eyes, then dropped them again, for no obvious reason. "This Miss—er—Millwood or Woodmill—I have no memory for names—is, it seems, an old friend of—er—of the family. He assures me that she was—er—in fact, was at school with his sister!"

Blackstone made his mouth small and round as if to whistle, but no sound passed his lips.



“I was greatly relieved to hear it—greatly relieved,” pursued the tutor. “Had it been otherwise, I should have—er—should have felt it my duty to write and inform his respected parent of his—er—in fact, of his folly. And that would have been unpleasant for all parties.”

With a preliminary sniff or two, Sammy relapsed into his former drowzy state. There was silence in the room for some minutes, broken only by the hard breathing of the little old tutor and the scratch and squeak of Blackstone’s pen as it sped its way across the paper.

It was a very proper letter, that of Sir Arthur Blackstone to Miss Woodward. Even Bunny’s jealousy could not have objected to a single word or phrase of it. It began, “Dear Miss Woodward,” and it ended “Your sincere friend, Arthur Blackstone.” It was nothing but a concise account of his interview with Harry Jones, and of the plans which had been made for that gentleman’s future welfare.

Having directed the envelope, he put it in the inward pocket of his coat, and stole from the room, making as little noise as possible for fear of disturbing Sammy. He took his hat and stick from the hall-table, where he had left them, and passed out into the street. Then, and not till then, he gave vent to a prolonged whistle—a whistle that had been pent up within him ever since he had heard the nature of Bunny’s excuse.

“That’s a good, old-fashioned lie anyway!” he muttered. “He’ll get himself in a pretty mess if he doesn’t look out! Sammy may mention it in writing to his father, or his father may come up to town and have a talk with Sammy. I wouldn’t be in his shoes for something!”

The sun had set and the sky was smoky red before him. The air had become very cold, and vapours were rising from no one knows where, rapidly condensing into fog. Down the long curve of the Hammersmith Road the square tower of a church with tapering pinnacles stood up

blue and misty against the last rosy flush of sunset, which gleamed above a bank of purple cloud.

“By Jove, though, it’s pretty!” Blackstone thought. “Why, it’s almost as good as a painting.”

With which high tribute to Nature he turned into the shadow of a by-street, and forgot the sunset for the time being.

“No, sir, she ain’t in, Miss Milly ain’t!” was the answer to his inquiry at the house in St. Christopher Avenue. “But Mr. Percy ’ve jess come back, if you was wishin’ to see ’im!”

Blackstone, signifying his readiness to see Mr. Percy, was ushered into the little dining-room, where he was soon joined by the gentleman in question.

“Well, Sir Arthur, this *is* an honour!” Percy said, flushing with pleasure as he shook Blackstone’s hand and remembered that it was the hand of a real live bart. “Sit down, sir! Pray, sit down!”

Blackstone laid the letter upon the table.

“I want you to give this note to Miss Woodward, if you please. I should like her to have it as soon as she comes in.”

“She shall, sir, she shall!” said Percy, rubbing his hands and eyeing the envelope with keen appreciation. Mil was going ahead, and no mistake. A bart. spoke as respectfully of her as if she had been the Queen of England, and wrote letters to her, and what not! Why, for aught Percy knew, that note might be an invitation for the whole Woodward family to go down and spend a month at Wulborough, to meet the Duke and Duchess of Tumfoozlegig, my Lord Tiddleywink, and all the rest of the tiptoppers. At least he would have something to boast of to his colleagues at the bank.

Blackstone’s voice broke in upon his reverie. “I say, how’s the pup?”

“Oh, he’s as right as a trivet! He’s down in the kitchen now, having his supper. He’ll be up here in a minute on the look-out for Mil. He knows her footstep four doors off. Remarkable the sagacity of these animals, isn’t it, Sir Arthur? Why, you’d hardly believe it, but that dog has got to know me quite well! He’ll come and curl himself up on the rug here, when I’m smoking my pipe after dinner, as friendly as can be!”

“He’s had time enough to get used to you, goodness knows!” said Blackstone, who found nothing strange in all this. “Now I must really be going,” he added, as Jane came in to draw the blinds. “Please tell Miss Woodward that I hope she isn’t any the worse for the excitement and worry of last night, and that I’ve done my best to settle the Harry Jones affair.”

Percy was utterly bewildered. “Harry Jones!” he gasped. “Last night!”

Blackstone, who had forgotten that her brother knew nothing of all that had happened, felt bound to stay and explain matters. And, as the story was rather long, and was moreover interrupted by numerous questions and comments on Percy’s part, it chanced that he was still explaining when the front door opened to a latchkey, and a light step was heard in the hall.

“That’s Mil!” exclaimed Percy, darting to the door. “Come in, old girl! Here’s Sir Arthur Blackstone himself come to see you, and brought you a note!”

His sister appeared, blushing and radiant. She looked wonderfully kissable, Blackstone thought, in her thick winter jacket, with some grey fur caressing her cheek. In common politeness he had to stay a little longer and talk to her.

Had he seen the bull-dog? No? Then Percy must go and fetch it. And, while they were alone together, Blackstone found time to tell her briefly what he had done in the

matter of Harry Jones. She thanked him, with tears in her eyes, and gave him her hand to hold—a priceless treasure—with which he was loth to part. Then, Percy re-appearing with Sambo, they both looked preternaturally innocent, and spoke hurriedly of the weather.

At length, when all had been said that could be said about the bull-dog and its points, Blackstone rose reluctantly, declaring that he must really be going, if he meant to be back at Sammy's in time for dinner. Milly said, "Oh, must you really?" with such regretful pathos, that he would certainly have sat down again had not a stern sense of duty held him to his purpose. She gave him her hand at parting, and he longed to raise it to his lips, but dared not, loving her as he did, and remembering her engagement to Bunny.

"How's Mr. Geegee?" Percy asked, as he opened the front-door with a flourish for the bart. to pass out. "And my future brother-in-law, Lee-Stretton, is he quite well?"

Blackstone replied, "Both all right. Got a bit knocked about last night, but nothing to speak of."

And he passed down the strip of tessellated pavement and out into the ill-lighted avenue. When he emerged from the labyrinth of by-streets into the wide sweep of the Hammersmith Road, there was no longer any red in the west, but only a blue spirit-light burning low in the sky, behind the smoke-wreaths. The church tower loomed dark and ghostly. For the moment he wished that Bunny—rabbit mouth, billycock, walking-stick and all—could have vanished like the sun, taking the light of his countenance to gladden the Antipodes, and leaving Sir Arthur Blackstone to darkness, illumined only by the rising hope of Millicent. But, alas! the age of such miracles is long since past.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### OF LIES IN GENERAL, AND MR LEE-STRETTON'S IN PARTICULAR.

THERE was once an Irish gentleman, the descendant of a thousand kings, the son of one baker. He was a member of Parliament, an orator, a poet, a novelist, a patriot, a Fenian, an anarchist, a socialist, and would have been a king if he had had his rights. He died, poor fellow, upon the terrace of the House of Commons, from mixing metaphors in his cups. One of his sayings has come down to us.

The Secretary of State for Ireland, arch-enemy of all true patriots, had just made a statement.

“Lies,” said the Irish gentleman, rising and glaring at the minister, who, it is reported, quailed beneath his glance—“lies are prolific as rabbuts; but although ye cannot do with liss than two rabbuts if ye are wishin’ to start a warrun, one single, dastur-rdly lie has power booth to begit and to bring forth a hool bivvy of hilty and robust prevar-rications, which strut abroad like paycocks, desavin’ by the brightness of their plumage, impoosin’ upon the beholder, and swellin’ and growin’, until he belaves them to be very lions of ver-racity. Ye will not shoot them like young rooks, neither will ye catch them with a lampoon like whales. They are vampoires suckin’ the life-blood from the dry boons of truth. Like swine, they drag ye where ye were not wishin’ to go, runnin’ between your legs, hangin’ on to your trousers, and causin’ ye indliss embar-

rassment, until at length they rise and, catchin' ye on their hor-runs, toss ye hidlong into the black abyss, where burruns the fire of Hill!"

This is a memorable saying, and there is a modicum of truth in it. Bunny had told one apparently harmless, little lie, and lo! a thousand considerable untruths had sprung from it, naturally, as it were, and without his connivance. They had not, it is true, attained to the hornèd stage, neither did he as yet so much as smell the smoke of the infernal pit; but, metaphorically speaking, they scampered about his legs, so that he could hardly take a step in any direction without tripping over some of them; and, strange to tell, each trip of his increased their number by one, by two, and sometimes by three.

Sammy had snortingly remonstrated with him upon the subject of his intimacy with what the little old tutor chivalrously termed a "female." He had said that, unless the matter could be explained to his (Sammy's) satisfaction, he would feel it his duty to write and warn Bunny's father of the substantial damages his son was preparing to incur. Therefore Bunny had hastily stated that Miss Woodward was an old school friend of his sister; and, almost before he was himself aware of the fact, he had named a boarding-school at Brighton, as the opening scene of the friendship, and had further mentioned that Miss Woodward often spent months together as a visitor at his home, and that his father and mother had no dearer wish than that their son should woo, and ultimately wed, this beautiful and accomplished girl.

Sammy had inhaled his satisfaction and relief in three distinct sniffs, and had let it out again in as many exultant snorts. He had called Bunny a nice, gentlemanly young fellow, and had sent him away with a cigar in his mouth. But, to the mind of Bunny, smoking the first fruits of infamy in the solitude of his own bedroom, a thought

occurred, bringing apprehension with it. Suppose that Sammy should make mention of Millicent in his letter, when he sent home the account for the term! Nothing could be more natural, after what he had himself said of his parents' views on the subject.

"I say," murmured the unhappy youth, "it's beastly awkward, you know!"

He hurried downstairs again, and knocked at the door of the study. In reply to his tutor's questioning glance, he said:

"I forgot to ask you, sir, not to mention what I've told you in writing to my people. I wish it to come as a surprise to them, you see! I shall let them fancy that I don't care a rap for Miss Woodward, and then, all of a sudden, I shall tell them, and they'll go pretty well mad with joy!"

"Er—umph—er—very well, Mr. Lee-Stretton," said the tutor, with a prefatory snort. "You are a very dutiful young fellow—very dutiful and—and filial indeed! I shall make a point of keeping your secret. Er—by the way—if you will give me Miss—Miss Woodmill's address, Mrs. Thompson shall call upon her, and she and her mother might come here sometimes to dinner. I am most anxious to further your parents' wishes in this matter—wishes which—er—in this case, coincide with your own. You are a nice, gentlemanly young fellow—" He was going to add, "Have a cigar?" but, seeing that his pupil was in the act of smoking, he substituted, "Er—what is the address?"

Bunny's face was crimson.

"I say, you know! It's awfully good of you, sir! But the fact is—at least—unless—well, the truth is, I believe she's going down to our place to-morrow—to stay with my sister, you know! And she won't be coming back to town till after Easter!"

"Er—dear me, how very unfortunate! But—er—if you

will give me the address, Mrs. Thompson will have great pleasure in calling on Mrs.—in fact, on Mrs. Millywood.”

“I say, thanks awfully, sir,” stammered Bunny, “but I’m afraid it can’t be managed.”

“Er—why not?” asked the tutor, in some surprise. “Mrs. Thompson would be delighted, I’m sure, to—er—to do the polite to the young lady’s mother.”

Bunny was becoming desperate.

“Well, the fact is, it can’t be done, because she’s dead and buried—died only the other day, of—of apoplexy!”

“Dear, dear!” murmured Sammy, with deep solemnity, “how very shocking! But—er—excuse the question—if she had so lately lost her mother, what was Miss—er—Miss Woodymill doing at Campden Hill last night? I fear she can have no bowels of compassion!”

“Oh, when I say ‘the other day,’ I mean months—years ago!” explained Bunny hastily. “They’ve got quite used to looking at her tombstone, you know! And they’ve chucked mourning, and all that sort of thing!”

“Ah—er—I see! But if you will give me the address, Mrs. Thompson can at least leave a card. Er—as I said before, I am most anxious to further your parents’ wishes, and your own, in this matter.”

Bunny faltered:

“I—I can’t give you the address, because there isn’t one! She’s just sold her town house, and she’s on the look-out for a small place in our county, so as to be near my sister!”

“Umph—er—well, well! In that case, I fear it is impossible,” said Sammy, with a disappointed sniff. “But you will kindly let me know when she returns to town, and Mrs. Thompson will have much pleasure in calling upon her, at an hotel or elsewhere.”

“Oh, yes, I’ll do that!” said Bunny, greatly relieved.



“Please don’t forget to keep my engagement a secret from my people, sir!”

And he went upstairs to finish his cigar, leaving his tutor with no doubts as to the desirability of a match between one of his pupils and a young lady of fortune, who had sold her London house, and was even then on the look-out for a snug little place in the country. He could not enough admire the kind forethought of the “nice, gentlemanly young fellow,” who chose to fill the cup of his parents’ happiness to the brim, before handing it to them. There were endless cigars for Bunny in perspective.

But Mr. Lee-Stretton, entangled as he was in a network of lies, which hampered all his movements, felt wretched and ill at ease. Even in the presence of his betrothed he was sometimes thoughtful, even morose. When, as sometimes happened in these later days, he went to tea in St. Christopher Avenue on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, he could not help contrasting Milly’s actual surroundings with the brilliant position he had invented for her. The maid-of-all-work, the dining-room, Percy, even the invalid mother in her bedroom upstairs, suffered by the comparison. At such times he became quite surly and snappish—so much so that Millicent began to wonder whether he was altogether the characterless being she was wont to think him.

So the days wore on, and Bunny’s lies almost imperceptibly increased in number, until they were as an army of pigmies arrayed against him, each brandishing a poisoned dart. By the time the Christmas holidays came, they had grown to giants, and every dart was a ten-foot spear.

If he had dreaded the going home in the summer, he dreaded it ten-fold now. Then there had only been the one sweet secret, a trellis, as it were, of honeysuckle, between himself and the home-people. Now, there was a whole prickly cactus-hedge of lies as well, one growing out of another, and the honeysuckle was out of bloom. He

felt the need of talking it over with somebody ; but Blackstone, very busy in the affair of Harry Jones, was seldom at leisure, and Brown Geegee, with his genius for grinning, was quite out of the question. On more than one occasion he went to the baronet's bedroom to unburden his conscience, only to find that the room was empty, or that its inmate, adding up accounts and making calculations with a puckered brow, had nothing but an expletive, and a hasty " I'm busy ; get out " to bestow on a visitor. It was not until the very eve of his home-going that he found the long-sought occasion of speaking to Blackstone alone.

They had, all three, been smoking their pipes in the class-room after dinner, when Brown Geegee suddenly rose, knocked out his pipe against the mantelpiece, and, muttering something about the resumption of his studies, shuffled out of the room.

Bunny looked intently at the fender.

" I say, you're not busy, are you, old chap ? "

" No," said Blackstone. " I've finished off that Jones business, you know. He's fixed up in a bran-new shop down at Walham Green, and seems likely to do well. You might buy your tobacco there, youngster. The walk 'll do you good ; besides, it'll please Miss Woodward."

He picked up the poker and began to beat a tattoo upon the chimney-piece, where his feet were resting.

" I can't see what she sees in him to make such a fuss about," said Bunny contemptuously. " He's a vulgar little beast, and I should say a sound thrashing would do him more good than all the petting in the world."

" You're wrong," Blackstone said, dropping the poker and taking his pipe from his mouth to emphasise the denial. " A thrashing would have sent him to the devil at a gallop, but this petting, as you call it, is making a man of him again. I shouldn't wonder"—he resumed his pipe—" if it made a gentleman of him in the long run."

Bunny laughed, trying to take the matter as a joke, despite his friend's earnestness ; but his face was expressive of disgust. Harry Jones a gentleman ! What would Blackstone be saying next ? He made haste to change the subject.

"But I say, you know, I'm awfully glad you're not busy because I want to talk to you—to ask your advice, in fact."

"Fire away."

"Well, it's about those lies I've told Sammy. It's beastly awkward, you know. I feel that I'm behaving like a cad, and I should be awfully glad to get out of it. But what's a fellow to do?"

Bunny shrugged his shoulders despondently.

Blackstone looked at him in silence for some seconds, and then said :

"Make a clean breast of it. Tell your mother. She won't be very hard on you."

"Oh, I say, you know, I couldn't really. She'd be sure to tell the governor and—and my sister, too, and there'd be the deuce of a row."

"Well, what of that ? It's bound to come sooner or later. You may as well have it now, and get it over."

"I shouldn't mind so much if it was only my father and mother, you see," said Bunny, leaning forward and speaking very earnestly. "But there's my sister."

Blackstone stroked his moustache.

"Ah, I understand ! Afraid of your sister ! Bit of a tartar, is she ? Well, most of 'em are when you know 'em. Glad I never had a sister, if they make a man feel that way. What like is this sister of yours, Bunny ?"

"Well, I don't quite know," said Bunny pensively. "Never thought of looking at her. So far as I remember, she has grey eyes, and a hooked nose, and rather rosy cheeks. She's about my height, and takes my colour in hair. I know one or two fellows round our place think her

a fine girl. I've heard the servants complain that she's haughty."

Blackstone eyed his fellow-pupil with compassion.

"Wears a sailor hat and a tailor-made coat and skirt, high collar, red tie, and brown boots? Stares at you when she shakes hands somewhere up in the air, and sneers a bit, as if she wonders what the people of the house can be thinking of to let a cad like you into a garden-party. Thaws a bit later on, and marries you if you give her the chance. But if you're wise or an old hand, you bolt directly you've shaken hands, and inquire your way to the place where they keep the refreshments. I've only been to one or two garden-parties and at homes in my life, but I know your sister quite well by sight."

"I say, you know," Bunny protested; "she isn't really as bad as all that! But I simply daren't let her know of my engagement."

"Sticks up for the honour of the family, doesn't she?" pursued Blackstone, with the suspicion of a sneer. "Knows the pedigree by heart. I suppose she'd look down upon Miss Woodward—eh, young 'un?"

"I'm afraid she would," said Bunny uneasily.

"Well, look here." Blackstone started to his feet and confronted Mr. Lee-Stretton. "Which do you like best—your sister or Miss Woodward?"

"Milly, of course," said Bunny, reddening.

Blackstone sat down again as suddenly as he had risen.

"Well, then, make a clean breast of it directly you get home. They can't prevent your marrying the girl as soon as you're of age, since you say you'll come in for some money of your own."

"But, I say, you know, they'd want to come up to town and call on her people; and then they'd see that cad Percy, and there'd be the devil of a row!"

"Has it never struck you," said Blackstone quietly, "that

you ought to give her a chance of seeing your family? It seems to me that you're not playing fair, young 'un! She has introduced you to her people, and you're inclined to run them down. I think it more than likely that she'll have a strong objection to yours."

"What objection could she possibly have to them, I should like to know?" said Bunny, very red and angry. "You have no right to speak of my people like that, Blackstone."

"You have certainly no right to speak of your *fiancée's* relations as you did just now," said Blackstone languidly. "My dear fellow, I'm only putting the matter before you from their point of view."

"It's quite impossible!" exclaimed Bunny excitedly. "I simply daren't tell my people and let them find out the lies I've told Sammy. I'll marry her as soon as I'm twenty-one, and then I'll take her down to our place, and introduce her all round. They can't object to her personally, of course. Even you, Blackstone, must confess that Milly's a perfect lady in herself."

"I never doubted it," said Blackstone, with the slightest possible stress upon the personal pronoun.

"Well, then," Bunny concluded, "I shall arrange it like that—marry her first, and introduce her afterwards. My birthday's on the first of April, you know, so they won't have very long to wait."

With that he rose, stretched himself, and went upstairs to pack his portmanteau.

"The proper birthday for a fool," muttered Blackstone, gazing thoughtfully into the red depths of the fire. "If I don't make a better gentleman than that out of Harry Jones, the tradesman's son, may I be d—d!"

## CHAPTER XXIV.

IN WHICH MISS WOODWARD SHOWS HER GRATITUDE TO SIR ARTHUR BLACKSTONE BY ASKING OF HIM A FAVOUR, AND AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN HAS BAD NEWS TO TELL.

So Bunny went home for Christmas, and his lies went with him, a nest of hornets in his very heart. During four long weeks he knew but little peace of mind, for his sister's grey eyes were inquisitive upon him, or his guilty conscience found them so. Miss Catherine Lee-Stretton was full of questions about her brother's life in London, and was especially curious in all that concerned Sir Arthur Blackstone.

"I should like to know him," she said, on more than one occasion. "You must bring him to see me, Douglas, when next I'm in town."

And Bunny, feeling in his heart that she suspected his secret and hoped to worm the truth out of Blackstone, mentally vowed that he would "be blowed if he did," but promised all the same.

Meanwhile, Blackstone stayed in town and read diligently in his agricultural and veterinary books, only going down to Wulborough for two or three days after Christmas. Every morning, after breakfast, he sat down with his books at one end of the long table, while Brown Geegee installed himself at the other. Sammy would look in, once or twice in the course of the morning, to see whether the coloured gentleman was in need of help. He never failed to call them "nice, gentlemanly young fellows," and often gave

them a cigar a-piece, as the guerdon of their diligence. After lunch they fell into the like studious attitudes until half-past three or four o'clock, when they had some tea and sallied forth arm in arm to take the air.

Blackstone had no difficulty in persuading the coloured gentleman to buy all his tobacco of Harry Jones; and so it happened that their evening walk often ended in a chat with Mr. Jones in the little parlour behind his shop at Walham Green. The ex-traveller in the bedstead line, viewing Brown Geegee in the light of a Maharajah, felt highly honoured by these visits, and was so effusive in his hospitality that the coloured gentleman was never weary of shaking his hand and assuring him of his friendship with a dazzling display of teeth.

Indeed, so fond did Brown Geegee become of this new friend that once, when Blackstone proposed that they should go and call on the Woodwards, by way of a change, he declined with many thanks and shuffled off alone in the direction of Walham Green. Blackstone was not sorry for this, as it made the chance of a confidential chat with Miss Woodward less remote. He watched the coloured gentleman—a mere bundle of wraps and a topper, that cold day—out of sight; and then made the best of his way to St. Christopher Avenue.

Miss Milly was at home, the maid-of-all-work said, and Mr. Percy too! Blackstone allowed himself to be ushered upstairs into the drawing-room.

He had never seen this room before, and he thought it mighty pretty, as he stood in the middle of the floor, awaiting Miss Woodward's appearance. He saw her hand in everything—in the Japanese fans, stuck about at eccentric angles upon the walls, in the strange artistic blue of the wall-paper, in the bamboo furniture, in the nick-nacks lying about upon queer little tables, which were of no use to anybody and surely had no business in so small a room. The

curtains so gracefully draped, and which harmonised so well with wall-paper and carpet, were of her choosing and arranging, he felt sure. The spirit of her lurked in every wrinkle of a primrose shade, which crowned a standard lamp by the window, in the very gas-light, which made it all visible to his eyes. His heart went out to the little room for its mistress' sake, and he was just thinking that he would have a room furnished like it at Wulborough, when Miss Woodward herself entered, and surroundings sank into insignificance.

He had come to tell her that Harry Jones was settled in his new shop, and seemed likely to prosper—that was all! As he told his story and she sat before him, with downcast eyes, her colour coming and going, her bosom rising and falling in agitation, he could not help recalling that last conversation with Bunny, much to his fellow-pupil's disadvantage. What a fool Lee-Stretton was, and a bit of a cad into the bargain!

He had scarcely finished speaking when Percy came in, very spruce and dapper, in his frock-coat and a pair of light trousers, donned for the occasion; and the hardly perceptible perfume of Milly, which had sweetened the room till then, shrank before a strong and unmistakable smell of brilliantine.

“How *are* you, Sir Arthur?” he said. “This *is* an honour. I'd 've told the slavey to put the room to rights, if I'd known you were coming. I—”

He would have run on much further in the same strain, had not Milly shot sharp arrows of disapproval from under her bent brows. As it was he rubbed his hands, looked confused, and murmured only, “This *is* an honour!”

“I say, Woodward, you're a smoker, aren't you?” said Blackstone. “You might get your tobacco from Harry Jones! I always deal there myself now, and I make a



point of recommending him to all my friends. Geegee's round there at this minute."

Percy scratched the back of his ear thoughtfully, keeping half an eye upon his sister's face, to make sure that he should not "put his foot in it" again.

"Well, Sir Arthur, it's like this, you see! The moment I found that I'd been, so to speak, nourishing a viper in my bosom, I said to myself, 'No more Joneses for me!' But since you say that he's a reformed character—why, we'll let bygones be bygones, and I'll go and buy some tobacco off him."

Blackstone slapped Mr. Woodward upon the back.

"That's right!" he said. "The name of the shop is Twinkler & Jones, and it's just across the road from Walham Green station. You might recommend it to your friends if you find the baccy good!"

"I will, Sir Arthur, I will," said Percy fervently, his back yet tingling from the friendly slap of a bart.'s hand. "I'll tell Elf and Bert next time I see them. They spend half their lives in tobacconists' shops, so they ought to be good customers. And I'll mention it in the debating society, next meeting we have. We might make him By Appointment, seeing he was once a member!"

"It is so kind of you to take all this trouble on my account," said Millicent, giving her hand to Blackstone when he rose to take his leave. "I do not know how to thank you."

Percy had left the room for a minute, to tell his mother of the bart.'s affability.

"Oh, there's nothing to make a fuss about!" said Blackstone awkwardly. "I'm only too glad of the chance of serving you. Is there anything else I can do?"

"There is something—" Millicent began; then she stopped short, and reddened to the tips of her pretty ears.

"Do tell me!" said Blackstone eagerly. "It's as good as done!"

He was still holding her hand, though he himself was hardly conscious of the fact, and surely Millicent knew nothing of it or she would have withdrawn it at once.

"Douglas told me—at least, I heard," she murmured, with eyes intent upon the pattern of the carpet. "I know I have no right to say such a thing, but please don't get drunk any more! Ever since I saw Mr. Jones like that, and—and realised what a dreadful thing it is, I've wished—at least, I've remembered what Douglas told me, and I've hoped it was not true. You'll forgive me, won't you? I know it's very impertinent of me, but I couldn't bear to think of you as being like that!"

She glanced timidly up into his face; but, as if frightened at what they saw there, her eyes fell again directly.

"Miss Woodward," he said, in a husky voice, "I promise you faithfully, upon my honour as a gentleman, that I will try and be worthy of your good opinion."

"No, no!" she exclaimed, in a frightened tone. "Not for my sake—for your own!"

"Anyhow, I promise." And in order to seal the promise by some outward and memorable act, he raised the little trembling hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Oh, how silly you are!" she said, laughing down a sob. "But it is very good of you not to be angry."

"How should I be angry? I think it's awfully good of you to take any interest in me at all. Nobody has ever done as much for me in my life—except schoolmasters, and they were paid for it."

"Well, I shall consider that you have paid *me*, and paid me handsomely, too, if you keep your word," she said, with a fleeting smile. "By the way, you've never once asked after Sambo!"

"How forgetful of me! Well, how is he?"

"I've a good mind not to tell you," she replied, with a pout. "You ought to have remembered him before! He's very well, he thanks you."

Blackstone looked at his watch.

"I must really be going now! Good-bye."

She gave him her hand again, saying, "Thank you so much for all that you have done for me! Nobody in the world could have done it so quickly or so well!"

His face flushed with pleasure. He longed to raise the hand again to his lips, but the former excuse was wanting, and before he could summon up his courage she had withdrawn the white temptation. There was nothing for it but to go, so he wished her a happy New Year and went out of the room. On the landing he ran against Percy, who escorted him downstairs with all possible honours. The hall-lamp, more obvious now than in the daytime, was safely dodged, and the two men shook hands at the door.

Blackstone asked: "I say, Woodward, do you ride?"

Percy replied: "Oh, yes. I'm thinking of buying a bike next quarter. What make do you recommend?"

"Horses I meant."

"A—a little," faltered Percy, with a nervous chuckle.

The little referred to was a donkey on Hampstead Heath, and perhaps a camel or an elephant in the Zoo.

"Good! Then you must come down to my place for a day's hunting some day soon. I can give you a pretty decent mount, and we'll try and make it lively for you."

Percy shuddered, as he thought that what Sir Arthur called "lively," would be deadly as nightshade to him.

"I'm afraid I couldn't manage it," he said. "You see, I can't get away from the bank, except Saturday afternoons and Sundays."

"What a nuisance! But, at any rate, you must get leave and come down for the partridges next autumn."

"Delighted," gasped Percy; "good-night."

Next autumn was a long way off, that was one blessing. He might join the volunteers in the interval and get some idea of shooting. In the meanwhile, there were two separate invitations to boast of, from "my friend, Sir Arthur Blackstone, Bart." The green-eyed monster would be rampant in the bank.

As Blackstone bent his steps homeward through the lighted streets, he kept his right hand inside his coat, only taking it out now and then, when the coast was clear, to look at it admiringly. A postman, coming sharp round a corner, saw him standing under a lamp-post smiling reminiscently at this hand of his. The obtuse bond-servant of a Penny Stamp supposed him mad; but it was but the gentle lunacy of love, which falls upon baronets and postmen alike, and which, in the case of postmen, is subject to the influence of a new moon at least three times in every month.

Arrived at his tutor's, Blackstone had barely time to wash, and put on a black coat and waistcoat, before the second bell rang. As it was, he was the last to take his seat at the dinner-table, and, while he was hurrying through his soup, had no eye for the antics of Brown Geegee, who sat opposite, and who was doing all that he could to attract his attention. But when, the soup being disposed of, he had leisure to look about him, he saw at once that something was wrong with Geegee, and felt strongly disposed to throw a decanter at his head.

The coloured gentleman's grimaces were frightful to witness. He grinned, and then frowned, and then did both at once, as only a coloured gentleman could. Catching Blackstone's eye, he straightway put his finger to his lip, leering horribly out of the corners of his eyes, first at Sammy, then at Mrs. Sammy, as if to warn him that they were not alone. Then he pointed to the ceiling, then to the floor, and finally threw back his head, drew his finger

across his dusky throat, and grinned with ghastly significance.

“Let me—er—let me warn you, once for all, against the perils of chronic alcoholism.”

The tutor leaned across the table, and snorted at the coloured gentleman.

Brown Geegee suddenly resumed his wonted aspect.

“I have never chronically alcoholized in all my life,” he cried indignantly. “It is a nasty-satan lie.”

Mrs. Thompson, from the other end of the table, murmured reprovingly :

“Mr. Geegee, Mr. Geegee ; surely you are forgetting your manners ?”

“I apologise to you, sir,” said Brown Geegee hurriedly, dropping a grin in his tutor’s direction ; “but I am not alcoholized whatever—only excited. Ah, Blackstone, my friend, I have many things to say to you.”

Mrs. Thompson suggested, “Perhaps they will keep until after dinner.”

“Oh, yes, they will keep,” said Brown Geegee. “They cannot possibly go more bad than they are already.”

He held his peace, curbing his grimacing propensities, until dessert was on the table, when he withdrew with Blackstone to the class room to smoke a pipe.

“What is it, old chap ?” asked the latter, when they were alone together.

“It is black-satan devilry,” said Brown Geegee solemnly.

“Yes, I know. What else ?”

“This afternoon I sat with my friend Jones, in his shop, and two men looked in at the door. They turned very pale, like lumps of death, when they saw me. Then they ran away. It was the Germans.”

“Are we never to be rid of those scoundrels ?” thundered Blackstone. “What did you and Jones do ?”

“Jones said ‘D—n,’ and I spat upon them in the spirit.”

“Why didn’t you run after them?” exclaimed Blackstone angrily. “We’ve got a clear case against them, if we can only set the police on their track.”

Brown Geegee grinned nervously.

“You need not lose your temper, Blackstone. I could not run out, because I stayed to comfort my friend Jones, who was very much disturbed by the evil-unexpected-satan-bad sight. He asked me to tell you at once, that you might go with all quickness to help him against them. He says that he is sure they are looking for him, and that they can damage him very much if they like. He made use of the word ‘blackmail,’ which I remember to have read in my law-books. He desires that you go to him immediately.”

“It can’t be done,” said Blackstone thoughtfully. “I’ve got a heap of letters to write, and to-morrow I’m bound to go down to Wulborough for a day or two.”

“Look here, Geegee!” he continued, rising and laying a hand on the coloured gentleman’s shoulder. “Can you remember a long message?”

“Rather,” said Brown Geegee, his face retiring in favour of a grin. “I have a palatial-big memory.”

“Well, tell Jones that there’s nothing to be afraid of, and that they can’t possibly do him any harm. If they come again, he has only to give notice to the police. If they threaten to expose his old connection with them, I know all the facts of the case, and I promise to stand by him. Can you remember all that?”

“Yes,” said Brown Geegee decidedly. “You speak like a book, my very good friend.”

“And you can tell him, while you’re about it, that Percy Woodward—Miss Woodward’s brother, you know—has agreed to let bygones be bygones.”

“All right. I will go to him early in the morning, and tell him all about it. He will be much relieved. I will now retire to my room and resume my studies.”

Left alone in the class-room, Blackstone dragged the table nearer to the fire, and sat down to write. Long after the tale of his letters was complete, he sat there, his face half-turned to the dying embers.

“It’s a nuisance!” he muttered at length, picking up the letters he had written, and preparing to go to bed. “But it can’t be helped. If only that young ass were out of the way, I might stand some chance. But, as it is—it’s no good thinking about it, or I shall be making a blackguard of myself. A jolly good job I’m going down to Wulborough to-morrow. I’m getting so confoundedly sentimental. But a day’s hunting ought to put me to rights.”

## CHAPTER XXV.

OF THE WAY OF A MAID WITH TWO MEN, AND OF THE  
TEARFUL PROSPECT OF A WEDDING.

IF Sir Arthur Blackstone really hoped to regain his peace of mind in the course of a three days' stay in the country, he was doomed to disappointment. Either Wulborough had lost some of its ancient charm for him, or he had lost some of his ancient liking for Wulborough. In spite of the noisy welcome of some two dozen dogs of every age and degree, he had no wish to prolong his visit beyond the prescribed limit. His appearance at a meet of the fox-hounds one grey Wednesday morning, was a signal for every virgin huntress in the county to rally round him. He only contrived to keep them at arm's length by solemnly declaring that his horse was an awful fighter, which was as big a lie as Bunny ever told.

“Where the carcass is, thither shall the eagles be gathered together,” he thought, and began to feel that he was not as other hunting-men are, having to the best of his knowledge quoted Shakespere.

He could not have shown less care for his person that day, had he been indeed the carcass of his quotation. Many a maiden heart beat wildly within the prison of a tight habit, as the most eligible bachelor in the county leapt five-barred gates and dashed his horse recklessly through the tops of high hedges. But Sir Arthur Blackstone knew nothing of these heart-beats.

There were dragons ahead, and he was charging them,



for Milly's sake : such was his frame of mind that morning. But when, late in the afternoon, he rode his tired steed back to Wulborough at a foot's pace, he was painfully aware that there were no dragons anywhere, only wretched little foxes, and that life was in no way worth living. Neither was there any adequate solace in the yelping and barking of the motley pack of dogs, that came tearing down the drive to welcome him.

He spent that evening in the library, closeted with his bailiff—a red-faced being of the farmer class, popularly supposed to wear gaiters even in bed—who was greatly surprised and somewhat dismayed at the profound knowledge of rural matters displayed by the young squire. The confidential adviser and general manager seemed likely to degenerate into the right-hand man. Early the next morning, Bill was at the door with the dog-cart, and Sir Arthur Blackstone drove off on his return to town.

Brown Geegee had found the time hang very heavy on his hands, in the absence of his tyrant. He had grown so accustomed to be officered and bullied by Blackstone, that he hardly knew what to do with himself when left to his own devices. Besides, he had of late grown very fond of Blackstone in his own mystic, Oriental way—perhaps because he had more than an inkling that Blackstone harboured a secret liking for him. However that may be, he welcomed his fellow-pupil with the utmost effusion, shaking his hand for minutes at a time, and grinning so consistently, that those who saw him feared that his face would never come right again.

“Ah, Blackstone!” he exclaimed, chuckling and showing the whites of his eyes. “I have many messages for you from my very good friend Jones!”

“All right, Geegee! I'll be ready to listen to you in a minute!” said the baronet, rushing upstairs to pay his respects to Sammy, who was dozing over a book in the

musty, little study. Having received his tutor's blessing in the shape of a cigar, he went up to his bedroom, unpacked his portmanteau, and then joined Brown Geegee in the class-room.

"Well, how have you been getting on, old image?" he asked paternally.

"I have been very dull," said the coloured gentleman, with a cordial grimace. "But I have spent much time with my friend Jones. Yesterday, I went to him at five o'clock, and he asked me to stay to supper and I accepted. The dinner was so well cooked that the cook came up and sat with us afterwards. She is a very plump, amiable lady. Moreover, she is satan-untidy. You know her, perhaps, Blackstone?"

Blackstone grinned.

"Oh, yes, I know Maria! I'm glad she's a good cook, for Jones's sake. Has he heard or seen anything of the Germans?"

Brown Geegee shook his head solemnly.

"No, they have vanished into nothingness. My friend Jones asked me to thank you for your kind message. He thinks you are a nice, friendly fellow, and he is much obliged. Moreover, he is not so frightened as he was at first. If they come again, he will send a messenger at once to you. That is all the message, I think!"

"I knew there was nothing for him to worry about," said Blackstone, looking relieved nevertheless. "I'll go round and look him up some afternoon soon."

"Come with me this evening!" suggested the coloured gentleman.

"I'm afraid I can't go to-day," he replied. "I've got to call on some people."

Brown Geegee, looking disappointed, seized the earliest opportunity of resuming his studies. Blackstone, who had missed lunch, and was pretty hungry from his journey,

wandered about the house in search of food. He at length found what he sought in the drawing-room, where Mrs. Thompson and a lady visitor were indulging in afternoon tea, toast, muffins, sandwiches, and a host of other dainties. Having refreshed himself with three sandwiches and a muffin, he left the ladies to their gossip, took his hat and stick from a stand in the hall, and went out into the street.

"There's no earthly excuse for going," he muttered, "but I can't help it!"

And without more ado he set out for St. Christopher Avenue. The lamplighter was just beginning his rounds when he raised the latch of the iron gate, walked up the strip of tessellated pavement, and announced his presence by a loud double knock. After a minute's delay, the door was opened; and Blackstone, who had been schooling himself to an interview with the maid-of-all-work, was stricken speechless, as the dainty form of Millicent herself stood before him, outlined against the gloom of the passage.

"Won't you come in?" she said; "Percy isn't home yet, but I expect him any minute!"

Fancying that her mention of Percy implied disapproval of his visit, Blackstone faltered:

"Oh, no, thank you! I only came round to inquire how you were. Didn't expect to find you at home so early!"

"I have had a holiday to-day," she explained. "I have not been very well since I saw you last."

"Oh, it's only a headache—nothing to speak of!" she added hastily, reading the dismay in his face. "I shall be all right to-morrow, I hope!"

"Well, I mustn't keep you standing here in the cold," he said, raising his hat, "I should like to call some other time when your brother is in, if you'll allow me!"

"Oh do, please, come whenever you like! Percy will be so glad! He's almost always home by five o'clock, and

any time after supper you'd be sure to find him. Thank you so much for coming! Good evening."

Blackstone strode away disconsolate. He had cherished a budding hope that she was growing to like him very much, that there might be some chance of ousting Bunny after all. But, this evening, her manner had been far from cordial. It had almost seemed as if she were afraid of him, so uneasily had she stood before him in the darkness of the doorway.

However, whether she liked him or not, he could not help loving her and longing for the sight of her. So he called the very next evening, ostensibly to see Percy, and, meeting with a warm, if deferential, welcome from that gentleman, he needed no excuse for further visits. Yet, despite his growing intimacy with the Woodwards, Millicent's attitude towards him left much to be desired. When circumstances obliged her to be in the same room with him, she kept her eyes away from his face, only addressing him indirectly through Percy. She saw through his excuse, he thought, knew that it was not her brother he came to see, and was angry with him for Bunny's sake.

One Saturday afternoon he went to tea in St. Christopher Avenue, by Percy's invitation and Millicent's permission. Rose Langley was of the party, radiant and inclined to be boisterous in the joy of having escaped for a time from the depressing shadow of her aunt and guardian. She seemed to take a mischievous pleasure in coupling Blackstone's name with that of Miss Woodward—to what purpose he could not imagine.

"Oh, Sir Arthur," she said, when the tea-things were cleared away, "I'm sure you sing. Do, please, sing us something. Milly will accompany you."

Blackstone protested that he had never sung willingly in his life, except in church now and then, whereupon Miss Langley changed her tactics.

"Let's have a game of hide and seek!" she cried. "Milly and Sir Arthur Blackstone can go and hide, Mr. Woodward and I will look for them!"

"Delighted, I'm sure," said Percy. "What do you say, Sir Arthur?"

"I should be very pleased," said Blackstone awkwardly. "But I'm afraid Miss Woodward would find it rather dull."

"How silly you are this afternoon, Rose," said Millicent, with a frown of deep meaning at her tormentor.

"Oh, am I?" retorted Rose, with a toss of her head. Turning, soft-eyed, to Percy, she asked, "Now, do *you* think I'm really so very silly, Mr. Woodward?"

"'Lesbia hath a beaming eye,' as the poet facetiously puts it," said Percy, rubbing his hands with a gratified chuckle. "I'm afraid I'm not an impartial judge."

"Oh, aren't you?" Rose exclaimed, in wide-eyed innocence. "Well, let's think of some game that we can all play together."

Percy suggested "kiss in the ring," with an amorous glance at the fair visitor. But Miss Rose, for her part, thought that a very silly game. However, she would submit to the ordeal, she said, if Milly and Sir Arthur wished it very much. Blackstone blushed up to the roots of his hair, and Millicent, her face the colour of a peony bud, murmured, "Rose," in a shocked tone of voice, looking and feeling very miserable.

"I think I must be going now," said Blackstone, anxious to relieve Miss Woodward of her embarrassment.

"Oh, no, don't go, Sir Arthur. We can't do without you—we can't really," Percy protested. "It takes four to play almost any game you like to mention. Please stay a bit longer."

Blackstone looked to Millicent for guidance in this dilemma. Her mute appeal decided his fate.

"I must really go," he said. "I've got to see a man about a dog at six o'clock."

"Well, I vote that Milly shows Sir Arthur to the front door," said Rose, her face aglow with mischief. "She deserves some punishment for calling me silly."

Percy caught eagerly at the chance of a *tête-à-tête*. "Yes, that's only fair, Mil! You can't very well refuse, you know, after the honour Sir Arthur has done us."

If ever one man yearned to strangle another, Blackstone longed to strangle Percy at that minute.

"You can't refuse, Milly," Rose cried, clapping her hands.

The Parthian shaft which Millicent shot over her shoulder as she swept out of the room would have annihilated any girl less full of life than was Miss Rose Langley. But the young lady in question only nodded encouragement, and laughed.

"Good-bye, Sir Arthur," said Percy. "I'm sorry you can't stay a bit longer. But what must be, must, as the saying goes."

"Good-bye," said Rose. "Take great care of Milly, won't you, Sir Arthur?"

Feeling angry and ashamed, Blackstone followed Millicent downstairs. "I'm awfully sorry," he blurted. "I'd much rather let myself out than give you all this trouble."

"No, it's not that," she said, standing with her fingers on the handle of the door. "But I'm so sorry that she should have talked like that before you. She is really a very nice girl, but she gets so excited sometimes that she doesn't care what she says! Please forget all that she said, won't you?"

She looked up into his face with more of anxiety than the occasion seemed to warrant.

"Of course, I sha'n't think of it," said Blackstone, laughing. "I saw at once that she was trying to tease you, or me, or

both of us. But I say, Miss Woodward," he continued, sinking his voice and speaking more earnestly, "I've been wanting to ask you something for a long time."

Milly trembled, and her eyes wandered down the passage, as if she would have liked to slip past him and make her escape. Her colour came and went, leaving her pale as a lily.

"Why do you always avoid me? Sometimes it seems as if you were afraid of me! Surely that cannot be so? But perhaps you don't like me coming so often to see you—your brother?"

Milly faltered. "It isn't that! I—I like you to come! It cheers Percy up and does him good!"

"Then what is it?" he pleaded. "What have I done? If there's anything in me you object to, only tell me, and I'll try to alter it! I value your good opinion more than anything in the world!"

"It isn't that!" she murmured. "How can you be so cruel as to misinterpret me so?"

"Well, then, I know what it is!" said Blackstone, seizing her hand. "You've found out my secret, and you think I'm not playing a fair game with Bunny. You're wrong, believe me! I'm not so conceited as to think—at least, I know that I stand no chance against Bunny! And I swear—"

She snatched her hand from him and, with a little, sobbing cry, slipped past him, and fled upstairs, leaving him to open the door for himself.

"Well, here's a rum go!" muttered Blackstone, seeking refuge in the language of his schoolboy days. "I've been and put my foot in it, somehow!" And he stroked his moustache assiduously all the way back to Sammy's.

Some minutes elapsed before Millicent rejoined Rose and her brother in the drawing-room. Even then she seemed to have re-appeared too soon, to judge by the

confusion of the pair, who started asunder, as though a bullet had suddenly passed between them.

"Well, Milly, how many kisses did he give you?" asked Rose, determined to brazen it out. "I've had six since you left us!"

"Seven!" Percy corrected her, with a blush.

"Yes, seven it was! Thank you, Mr. Woodward!" Rose bowed her acknowledgments. "Milly looks as though she'd had a hundred at least!"

"Rose! How *can* you talk like that?" Milly exclaimed indignantly.

She inclined her head meaningly in Percy's direction, seeming to imply that there was some understanding between them, to which Percy was a stranger.

"Well, dear, you needn't get so cross about it!" said Rose soothingly. "It's only my fun, you know!"

"She's chokeful of fun, Miss Rose is!" said Percy. "'Oh, woman, in our hours of ease, uncertain, coy and hard to please,' as the poet jocosely puts it! Excuse me one minute, ladies! I'll go and see if mother wants anything."

No sooner had the door closed behind him than tears came into Millicent's eyes, and she said reproachfully, "How cruel of you, Rose, to torture me like that!"

"I've no patience with you!" Rose tossed her head. "You're in love with him, and yet you're angry with me for giving him a chance of finding it out!"

"You forget that I'm engaged to Douglas!" said Millicent coldly.

"Oh, bother Douglas! He's only a silly boy, and it won't break his heart, if you do throw him over! It makes me quite cross to see two people in love with each other, and neither daring to say anything about it!"

Rose would have argued the point further, but just then Percy returned, and confidences became out of the question.



As for Blackstone, the more he pondered over his interview with Miss Woodward at the door the more convinced he became that he had, to use his own metaphor, "put his foot in it." But he could not for the life of him think when or how. After much thought he came to the conclusion that she really disapproved of his going so often to the house, and had only denied the charge from a mistaken sense of politeness. He determined to wait some weeks before calling there again. And, in the meantime, Bunny returned to London. Mr. Douglas Lee-Stretton was in high spirits. The burden of his lies was considerably lightened by the transit from country to town. His first question, after shaking hands with Blackstone, was :

"Have you seen Milly lately?"

"I saw her about a week ago," was the answer. "She had been ill, but was getting well again. Pining for you, I expect!"

"Girls take things to heart so," Bunny murmured complacently. "I haven't been able to write as often as I could have wished—because of my people, you know! I'll go and fetch her home from business to-morrow and cheer her up a bit!"

Accordingly, when to-morrow evening became this evening, there was Bunny, waiting outside the office door. And, if Millicent's greeting was less effusive than the young ladies peeping out at every spy-hole had a right to expect, he was entirely satisfied, and that was the chief thing after all. Rose Langley happening to come out while they were still exchanging greetings, Bunny could hardly do less than invite her to join them at tea at the pastry-cook's shop across the street. And, as she accepted promptly, and travelled with them afterwards as far as High Street, Kensington, there was but little of the privacy which Bunny loved that evening. However, he managed to get in a kiss or two when he said good-bye at the gate in St.

Christopher Avenue ; and he went home very well pleased with the day's work.

When Saturday came, he took her out to lunch, as usual, and to the theatre. After the play, they had tea together at a shop in the Strand, and then drove home in a hansom. She had grown strangely silent, he thought, as he sat beside her, fondling her hand. Now that he came to think of it, she had been rather quiet and undemonstrative all the afternoon. Feeling vaguely that he had somehow failed in his duty, he did his best to make amends by raising the little gloved hand to his lips and murmuring, "Darling!" "Angel!" "Sweetest!" in impassioned tones. But she neither moved, nor gave any answer, and there was no responding pressure of his hand. He said anxiously :

"Darling, are you ill?"

Her answer was a sob. She was crying. He could see the tears shine in her eyes as they drove past a lamp. What was he to do?

"I say, you know!" he blurted. "There's nothing to cry about! I love you awfully, you know. Don't cry, dearest!"

"It's very silly of me, I know," said Millicent, battling with her sobs. "But please don't talk to me, there's a good boy!"

So they drove in silence the rest of the way, Bunny trying to guess the cause of her grief, and going hopelessly astray in his conjectures. Having dismissed the hansom in the neighbourhood of St. Christopher Avenue, he led her to the iron gate of No. 15. There she said good-night, and, hurriedly submitting to a kiss, ran indoors, leaving him alone with his wonder and consternation.

"Why, what's the row, young 'un?" Blackstone asked, as, half an hour later, Bunny burst into the class-room with pale face and excited eyes. Sinking into a chair, Bunny gasped out his tale in short, detached sentences, hard to piece together.

"It's beastly awkward, you see!" he said in conclusion.  
"I don't quite know what to do about it!"

Blackstone stared blankly at his boots.

"I'm afraid I can't help you," he said.

Bunny sat looking into the fire for some minutes. Then he raised his eyes and, slapping his knee, exclaimed:

"I have it!"

"Fire away, then!"

"Well, you see, it's like this: We've been engaged a long time, and she has naturally grown a bit fond of me. I'm almost twenty-one, and I haven't begun to make any arrangements for the wedding. Perhaps she thinks I mean to put it off!"

Blackstone eyed his friend curiously.

"You think she's keen on getting married? It never struck me in that light before!"

"But I say, you know! That's the only way to explain it!" cried Bunny excitedly. "Poor little girl! If I'd had any idea, I'd 've fixed the date and all, long ago!"

Blackstone said:

"It is usual, I believe, to ask the lady to name the day—at least, I've read so in books."

Bunny slapped his knee again.

"Well, I'll ask her to fix a date the very next time I see her. She must be awfully in love with me—don't you think so, Blackstone?—to cry like that about it! I call it deuced flattering to a fellow! She must be pretty well head over ears, mustn't she, old chap?"

"Yes, if it is as you suppose," said Blackstone drily.  
"You'll be married by license—eh?"

Bunny became thoughtful.

"I don't know! A license comes rather expensive, doesn't it? I shall have to do it on the cheap, I'm afraid; because, you see, I can't get at my money the moment I'm

twenty-one. There'll be papers to sign, and all that sort of humbug."

"Registry office or church?" Blackstone asked.

"Oh, church! It must be church!" exclaimed Bunny eagerly. "If anything could make my people angrier about it than they will be, it 'd be a marriage by the registrar. You don't know my mater, old chap! I don't believe she'd consider it a marriage at all!"

"I fancy Miss Woodward would agree with her there," said Blackstone.

"Well, then, that's settled. We'll be married by banns and in church. And I'll get her to name the day the very next time I meet her. That'll dry her tears, I bet!"

He went up to his bedroom to think it over, leaving Blackstone a prey to certain bitter reflections, which tormented him during the rest of the evening, and effectually robbed him of all sleep for that night.

But when, two days later, Mr. Lee-Stretton broached the subject of the banns to Millicent, she looked frightened and stopped up her ears, positively refusing to listen to any such horrible suggestions. Her lover, setting down these symptoms to the inborn modesty of her sex, was not in the least daunted. Calling his whole store of endearing epithets to his aid, he pleaded with her; and at length, finding all his efforts of no avail, took her home in a hansom, and saw her safe indoors. Then, after a decent interval, he invoked the maid-of-all-work by a loud, quadruple knock, and asked to see Mr. Woodward alone for a minute.

Percy gasped when the state of the case was explained to him.

"Won't name the day, won't she? Well, I'll see to that if you'll allow me. I'll find out from mother, and I'll let you know. You mustn't mind her, Mr. Lee-Stretton. She's a good girl, is Mil; but she's wayward—untamed

you may say. But you'll soon alter that, I expect, seeing how fond she is of you. I'll arrange about the banns at our church, if you'll do the same at yours. About the third or fourth week in April, I think you said? I'll make a note of it. You needn't trouble yourself. I'll see that it's all right. Let me see! Your address is the same as Sir Arthur Blackstone's, isn't it? That's all right. Don't you worry about Mil's behaviour! It's coyness, that's all. It *is* rather trying for a girl when you come to think of it! Good-night." So saying, he ushered Bunny to the front door. "Funny that you and I'll be brothers-in-law in three months' time, isn't it?" he said, rubbing his hands enthusiastically, as Mr. Lee-Stretton passed out.

"Yes, isn't it," echoed Bunny, without the enthusiasm.

In the course of the following week he received a letter from Mr. Woodward, couched in the most complimentary terms, informing him that the 25th of April would suit Millicent very well, if that date were agreeable to Mr. Lee-Stretton; further containing certain stipulations concerning Mr. Lee-Stretton's intercourse with Millicent in the meantime, which Percy felt it his duty as a brother to make. Bunny replied that all the arrangements would suit him perfectly. Then and not till then he began to repent, to think that he had been, perhaps, a little foolhardy in thus hurrying on the wedding; and grim phantoms of irate parents and a still more irate sister began to hover round his bed at nights.

Sir Arthur Blackstone, feeling wretched, and seeing no way out of his wretchedness, took to going often to Waltham Green to confide his sorrows in Mr. Jones, who alone, of all the world, could fully sympathise with him. And these two raised the wail of grief and rage alternately—strophe and antistrophe—like the chorus of a Greek tragedy, or the mourners at an Eastern funeral.

Never was day more dreaded and anathematised, since

the world began, than that twenty-fifth day of April. Millicent, weeping at her bedside in St. Christopher Avenue; Bunny, phantom-haunted in his chamber at South Kensington; Blackstone and Harry Jones, invoking all the furies at Walham Green; Rose Langley, crying her eyes out for her friend's sake at Campden Hill, and causing her aunt to suspect the Prince of Darkness by refusing to tell her what the matter was. What a wedding it would be!

## CHAPTER XXVI.

IN WHICH MR. JONES CONFERS GREAT BENEFITS UPON  
WALHAM GREEN, AND HIMSELF DERIVES BENEFIT  
FROM THE BRAZEN EXAMPLE OF AN INDIAN GENTLE-  
MAN.

THE men of Walham Green had enjoyed peace and tranquillity for years; but, like their brethren of less favoured regions, they were apt to be discontented. There was a hitch somewhere in the world's machinery, which prevented them from enjoying perfect happiness. The wealthy draper at the corner by the railway station, and the prosperous green-grocer, his near neighbour, bemoaned the press of business with wringing of hands, complaining that they had no leisure for recreation. The working-tailor in the shabby street round the corner bewailed the lack of customers and a tendency in his wife to increase the family by two at a time. Well-to-do costermongers lamented that they were so busy as to have no time for meditation; and ragged loafers, redolent of beer, seemed to find more pleasure in telling one another that jobs were scarce, than in looking out for the chance of one of the said scarce jobs. The needy declared that the world wanted setting to rights; and the prosperous complained that the world had been too much set to rights already, that there was no variety in life. The latter joined the local volunteers in the forlorn hope of an invasion; the former enrolled themselves in Trades' Unions and Liberal Associations, and talked sedition in the bars of public-houses.

No one suspected the existence of a cheap remedy ready to hand, until one fine morning in March, when the blind walls and hoardings of the neighbourhood were placarded with invitations to "Try Jones's Smoking Mixture and be happy!" and to "Smoke Twinkler's Alright Blend, which is Heaven on Earth!" At sight of which the world of Walham Green was moved from basement to ceiling, and a motley throng hastened to Harry Jones's shop to buy an ounce of bliss, whatever the cost.

Mr. Jones, behind the counter, rubbed his hands and chuckled with satisfaction, as customer after customer left the shop with Nirvana in his smile and a pouchful of the mixture in his pocket. The wealthy draper—two doors down, on the same side—sent round one of his young men to order half a pound of it, and the crossing-sweeper from the corner stepped in, demanding a pennyworth. Harry Jones served them all, beaming with philanthropy, and the coins clinked musically as he swept them into the till.

It had come to him, as an inspiration, this notion of a mixture and a blend. One Sunday afternoon he had gone out for a walk, leaving Maria to keep shop in his absence. She understood the business almost as well as he did by this time, and her swelling figure, restrained within the becoming limits of her Sunday gown, was quite an attraction to customers. He was walking along the Fulham Road, when, happening to pass a tobacconist's window, he saw a placard adjuring passers-by to try "Our Special Smoking Mixture." The idea took possession of his brain. Why should not Twinkler and Jones have their mixture, as well as another firm? Indeed, as there were two partners, why should not Jones have his mixture, and Twinkler his blend? Turning the matter over in his mind, he went to call upon his cousin.

Mr. Twinkler was enchanted with the notion and, being an enterprising young man, suggested advertisement upon



a large scale. But how about the mixtures themselves? he asked. It would be very hard to hit upon two combinations of tobacco at once new and to everybody's taste. Mr. Jones gave it as his opinion that no regular mixture was advisable, that the tobacconist should endeavour to learn the taste of each individual customer, so that all should be satisfied. "At least," he said, "'avin' two mixtures, we can change about; so that if a man don't like Jones's, we can mix Twinkler's to 'is likin'!"

His cousin slapped him on the back, admiring his head for business, which, he was sure, had been quite thrown away in the bedstead line. And they sat up till late that night, concocting the advertisements.

So Twinkler and Jones became two signposts, indicating two parallel roads to Happiness; and the denizens of Walham Green and Fulham jostled each other as they paid toll at either gate. So great was the press of business, that Mr. Jones had serious thoughts of advertising for an assistant in the shop. But, reflecting that honest lads are hard to come by nowadays, he thought it better to continue as before, only calling in Maria to his aid at meal-times and on Sunday afternoons.

One evening, just as he was thinking of putting up the shutters for the night, a gentleman in top hat and frock-coat entered the shop, wearing a carnation at his button-hole. Harry Jones stepped back, putting up a hand to shade his eyes. "Why, it's Perce, I declare!" he thought. "Got up regardless, too!"

The gentleman stretched out his hand across the counter.

"Harry, dear boy, give us your flipper!" he said. "Let bygones be bygones between us! I forgive the past!"

Harry shook the proffered limb cordially.

"Why, Perce, old man, this *is* a pleasure! Wait a jiffy

while I put up the shutters, and we'll smoke a pipe together in the parlour."

"Afraid I can't stay, dear boy—not to-night anyway. I just came round here on my way to a debate. We meet at Bert's place to-night, and as it was not much out of my way, and seeing that I'd promised Sir Arthur to come and look you up, I thought I'd drop in, just to shake hands. By the way, I want half a pound of baccy. What's this mixture of yours I see advertised?"

"I 'ardly think the Mixture 'd suit you, Perce. The Blend 'd be more in your line, I fancy. You like rather a 'eavy smoke, if I remember rightly?"

"I generally smoke Gold Flake, with a dash of Hand-cut to give it a sting," said Percy.

"Ah, then, Jones's Mixture is your ticket, old man! Wait a bit, and I'll let you 'ave some of a new lot!"

Seizing a couple of tins from a shelf in the shop, Mr. Jones dashed into the back-parlour to concoct a mixture of Gold Flake and Cavendish, such as Percy loved.

"I 'ope you'll find it to your likin'," he said, assuming his philanthropic smile, as he returned with the compound. "Don't forget to recommend us to your friends! 'Alf a pound, I think you said?"

"How much?" asked Percy, fumbling in his pocket.

"Don't talk of payment, old man!" exclaimed the tobacconist, weighing out half a pound of happiness. "Accept it as a peace offerin'!"

Percy was quite overcome by this unlooked-for piece of generosity. He could only squeeze Harry's hand across the counter and murmur, "Thank you, dear boy!" with glistening eyes.

"Don't forget to recommend it to your friends!" Mr. Jones reiterated, as he bowed his customer to the door. "We cater for all tastes. Such as don't fancy the Mixture find satisfaction in the Blend, and t'other way about!"

"I'll mention it in my speech this very evening," said Percy, deeply moved. "And I venture to say, dear boy, that we shall drink success to Jones's Mixture with all the honours."

Percy evidently liked the tobacco, his friends likewise, for he returned in little more than a week to replenish his stock. This time Mr. Jones allowed him to pay for it at the rate of fourpence an ounce, although ordinary customers were charged fivepence-halfpenny and even sixpence for a similar article. Other members of parliament followed the example of their premier. Elf and Bert came round one Saturday afternoon, and, taking their seats upon the counter, talked equine and canine matters to Mr. Jones for the space of half an hour, finally purchasing a quarter of a pound of Bliss, in the shape of the Blend, between them. The little man also, who had a cousin in America, and who may be considered the innocent cause of some part of Harry's misfortunes, sacrificed half a crown upon the altar of goodwill, and laid in a large stock of the Mixture. Amid all this whirl of excitement and bustle of trade the tobaccoist had small leisure to think of the Germans, or speculate as to their whereabouts. He had made a fresh start in life, and the past was clean wiped out.

Therefore, when Brown Geegee, who generally dropped in about six o'clock for a few minutes' chat, asked whether he had seen any more of the satan-devil badmen, he replied in the negative.

"They won't come round 'ere again," he said confidently. "Why, it's more than two months, Mr. Geegee, since you and I saw them standin' in that doorway. I declare I'd all but forgotten that there ever were any such people."

This confidence of his was contagious. Brown Geegee expressed his satisfaction in a chuckle and a grimace. Having suffered his pouch to be filled with the mixture, he took his leave. But Harry, once reminded of the Germans,

could not keep them out of his brain. Customers came and customers went; darkness cast her mantle over Walham Green, and lamps were lighted in the street without; but still he thought of his old tyrants, reviewing every incident of his life with them. And something of the old, abject fear revived within him.

They knew where he lived, that was certain. And they might call at any time to crave—or rather to demand—the loan of a few pounds. He wished uneasily that he had not been quite so confident in his reply to Brown Geegee. Such confidence was like a challenge to fortune, and the fickle jade was ever ready to change sides upon the lightest provocation.

Having put up the shutters for the night, and locked the outer door of the shop, he picked out a cigar from among the best of his stock-in-trade, and betook himself to the back room to reckon up the day's profits. There he was joined by Maria, as soon as she had finished washing up, and had had time to change her kitchen dress, with its tendency to fly open, for a gown having its full complement of hooks and eyes.

“Lor', Mr. Jones,” she said, entering the sanctum with a mincing gait, “'ow tired you do look, to be sure. Let me add up them figures for you, while you sets by the fire and smokes your cigar comfortable. Why, poor dear, you look that weary, as if you could 'ardly keep your eyes open.”

Harry Jones passed the account-book to her across the table.

“That column is the profits. You needn't bother yourself about the others.”

So saying, he drew his chair up to the blaze, while Maria, with knitted brow and tongue in cheek, began a manful struggle with the difficulties of compound addition.

They were sitting thus, Harry gazing pensively into the fire, Maria muttering, “Carry four—and six is ten,” and the like, when a knocking at the street door disturbed them.

The tobacconist started to his feet. He looked frightened.

"Maria," he hissed between his clenched teeth, "I don't know why, but I know it's those German beasts."

"Lor', Mr. Jones, and what makes you think that?" murmured Maria, horror-stricken. Like most of her class, she had a firm belief in presentiments. It was as if he had said: "They are here. I have seen them."

The knocking was repeated, louder this time than before.

Harry's knees trembled audibly. Maria's jaw fell, dragging her mouth open. They stared fearfully at each other.

The knocking was renewed a third time.

"I must open to 'em, I suppose," faltered Harry; "because—because, you see, it might be someone else important."

In his heart he knew it could be no one else at that hour of the night, and when they had been in his thoughts all the evening. Yet, for very shame of his superstition, he had to open the door and make sure.

"Take somethink with you," cried Maria, looking round hurriedly for some handy weapon of defence.

She snatched up the poker out of the fender, and thrust it into his shaking hand. The knocking was repeated a fourth time.

Harry Jones, poker in hand, tottered out of the room and down the passage. Maria caught up the lamp and followed him.

"I'll throw this at their 'eads, if they get past you, Mr. Jones!" she cried hysterically. "I don't care; not if it sets the 'ouse o' fire, so long as it stops 'em."

Harry Jones undid the chain, and slipped back the bolts, one by one, Maria standing a few paces behind him, ready to hurl the lamp at a second's notice. He opened the door a very little way, and lifted the poker, expecting a hand or a foot to be thrust in wedgewise, in which case he would

have done his best to disable it. But all that strove to enter was a voice.

"Open, my very good friend. It is I—myself. You have kept me waiting already too long in the black-cold air. Moreover, it is ice-chilly out here. My teeth converse together in my mouth. There is a pain in my stomach. I departed from Sammy's in such a steam-engine hurry that I forgot to put on my nice fawn overcoat. Blackstone besought me to come. I bring news—great news—grand news. Hurrah! God bless you! News that will make you dance and sing for jubilation. It is all in the evening paper. It is here."

Long before the end of this speech, the door was flung wide open, and Brown Geegee admitted into the passage.

"What! Mr. Geegee?" cried Harry Jones, lowering the poker in a sort of impromptu salute. "If I'd so much as guessed it was you, I'd 've opened at the first—'pon my word I would, and no bones about it."

Maria's sigh of relief caused quite a draught in the passage.

"We made sure it was them Counts, sir," she said.

"Ha," said Brown Geegee, glancing in astonishment from one to the other. "It is not nice to receive a friendly fellow, who brings good news, with a soot-nasty poker to hit him with it. You thought I was those filthy devil-chaps? Very good! never mind. I accept your apologies. By and by, I will clasp your hand in friendship, but not now. Do you know, Jones, it is curious that you should 've thought of those satan-count beasts this evening? Such news. Ha, ha!" The coloured gentleman threw his head back and laughed, rolling his eyes in a very ghastly manner. "I will accept a glass of beer, if you please, and I will smoke with you. Then, when we are all cushion-comfortable, I will divulge the newspaper, which I have here in the pocket of my coat."

With effusion of honour, due in great measure to the relief of his hearers, Brown Geegee was ushered into the little parlour behind the shop. Mr. Jones replaced the poker in the fender. Maria set down her lamp upon the table, and gathered up the account-book and pencil, thinking to finish her verifications in the kitchen.

“Shall I bring up a jug o’ beer and glasses, sir?” she inquired, looking to Mr. Jones.

“Yes, do,” was the reply, “that is — unless Mr. Geegee ’d prefer a glass o’ somethin’ ’ot after waitin’ in the cold.”

The coloured gentleman laid a hand on his waistcoat and bowed to the maid. Though she no longer viewed him in the light of a nigger minstrel, his colour and the whiteness of his linen always appealed to her as ludicrous, even without those gestures and grimaces, which she stiled his “antics.” It was all she could do to refrain from laughing.

“Miss Maria,” he said, leering frightfully, “you are a sweet angel-girl, and I love you. I am, moreover, satan-shivery at present. Bring me a glass of whisky, with sugar in it, and hot—hot like hell—you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Maria, grinning widely as she left the room.

No sooner was she gone than Mr. Jones leaned towards Brown Geegee and began tentatively :

“You were sayin’, Mr. Geegee, that Sir Arthur ’d asked you to give me some news. Very kind of ’im, I’m sure. Good news, I think you said, and about the Germans? They ’aven’t been copped, ’ave they? That ’d be good news, and no mistake! In the paper you said, I think? I should like to see it. Come, Mr. Geegee, I’m sorry about the poker, if it gave offence; but I take my oath I thought it was that German riff-raff when I ’eard you knock. I beg your pardon, I’m sure, but there was no offence meant. Come, Mr. Geegee, let me see the news Sir Arthur wished

me to know. Are they copped, sir? Yes or no—that's all I ask."

But Brown Geegee was inexorable. He acknowledged Harry's entreaties, as a tribute to his importance, by a knowing wink. Then he slapped that pocket of his jacket which contained the newspaper, and buttoned the jacket up to his throat. To make security yet more sure, he folded his arms across his chest. Then he grinned, then chuckled, and finally, with an infinitely sly movement of his head, murmured :

"Not yet, Jones. You must be patient, my very good friend. Wait until my dear-sweet Maria returns with my whisky-drink. Then you shall know."

He was resolute not to divulge his secret to an inglorious audience of one, when there were two people within reach to be impressed by it. Meanwhile he revelled in the sense of power it gave him, and inhaled the beseeching words of Mr. Jones and his deprecatory air, as the brazen divinities of his country inhale the perfumed smoke of sacrifice—in immovable silence, that is to say, and with a fixed grin on his face.

"Well, Mr. Geegee, I must say you're a character, and no mistake," said Harry Jones, grinning too, when, the first eagerness of curiosity past, he came to regard the coloured gentleman with a dispassionate eye. "Now, 'ere's Maria and the drinks, so I suppose we may 'ope to 'ear about it soon."

The maid set down the tray upon the round table in the middle of the room. Though very inquisitive, she was preparing to withdraw, when Mr. Jones called out :

"Stay, Maria. Mr. Geegee says 'e won't tell a word of it without you're there."

"Lor', sir!" said Maria. "Me!"

She looked roguishly at the coloured gentleman, with more of freedom in her glance than she would have dared



to use to Mr. Jones. She stood in some awe of the latter, whereas, for all the deference with which she saw him treated, she could not help feeling for the former some of the comradeship which your servant feels for the pet monkey of your establishment, or the comic fellow who comes to enliven your wife's "at homes," and takes his supper alone in the dining-room.

Brown Geegee accepted the glance, but mistook its import. It seemed to him of admiration, and he welcomed it accordingly. There was no doubt in his dusky brain that he had made a conquest, that those apple cheeks and that exuberant figure were his whenever he should choose to claim them. His leer was awful to witness. He nodded and beckoned her to come closer. Her blue eyes laughed frankly into his brown ones—mere oblique slits just then, twinkling with cunning. She set a chair for herself between him and Mr. Jones.

"Now, Mr. Geegee, we're all snug and comfortable, sir. Let's 'ave the news," said Harry, a trifle impatiently.

He was annoyed with Maria for encouraging the coloured gentleman in those dilatory grimaces, when she ought to have been dying for the news, as he was.

"Oh," said Brown Geegee, as if he had but just remembered it, "it is that the police have taken possession of those black-satan Germans we all hate. Blackstone said you would stand upon your head to hear it. And my dear-sweet-beautiful Maria—she is glad to hear it, too, I hope?" He turned the galaxy of his teeth upon her, and his almond eyes languished out of sleek creases. "Here, Jones, is the newspaper of this evening. It is there. Blackstone has indicated the paragraph with a blot of ink."

And, while Mr. Jones folded the pinkish sheet, and disposed himself comfortably to read, the coloured gentleman sidled his chair closer to Maria, stealthily, grinning fiendishly all the while, and showing his white teeth.

“A CAREER OF CRIME.—Two Germans, who gave the names of Karl and Fritz Weissmann respectively, and Eliza Hawkins, an Englishwoman, were charged at Hammersmith police-court this morning with the robbery of James Walters on the fifteenth instant. The police have had their eye on the gang in question for some time past, and Walters was placed in their way as a decoy. Many similar robberies have taken place of late in the neighbourhood, drunken men and strangers being the chosen victims. It was their practice, as clearly shown in the case of Walters, to strip those who had the misfortune to fall into their hands, not only of all jewellery and valuables, but of the very clothes they wore, dressing them in rags afterwards, and leading them out blindfold to a safe distance from their lair. . . . All three pleaded guilty, and were committed for trial. . . . This gang of scoundrels has been at work in London for more than a year. . . . The police suspect ramifications with other gangs of foreigners in the same line of business.”

Harry Jones skimmed the latter half of the paragraph. It was immaterial to know what the police were doing or not doing, what the magistrate thought or the public were led to suppose, compared with the main, joyful fact that his dreaded tormentors were in prison, out of the way. They might try to implicate him when it came to the trial. What matter? He had Sir Arthur Blackstone at his back—and Mr. Geegee too, who was not likely to spare the “black-satan Germans,” as he called them, if placed in the witness-box against them. He and his swell friends could tell a better story against Weissman and company than they could tell against him. Besides, it was not likely they would mention his name at all. Where was the use, when they would be condemned any way, and he was in a position to bring more crushing evidence against them?

He read the blessed words again—a third time, and then

a fourth. He wanted to get them fixed in his brain. Strange, he thought, that he should have had the thought of those scoundrels running in his head all the evening. It only showed what fools some folks were to laugh at presentiments, and all that. He folded the paper.

“Mr. Geegee, ’ow can I thank you for comin’ so prompt to tell me? And I ’ope you’ll express to Sir Arthur---”

He stopped short—gaping. Indeed, what he beheld was calculated to excite surprise in any man who had been absorbed in a newspaper and his own reflections, and so had not marked the stages which led up to it. There was the coloured gentleman, his chair drawn close to Maria’s, one dusky hand peeping from behind her ample waist, the other grasping a tumbler half-empty of grog, leering up into the rosy face of the maid, which, to judge from his glee and the ruminating motion of his lips, he must have kissed quite lately.

“Come, come, Mr. Geegee ; I can’t ’ave this,” said Harry Jones severely, shooting an angry glance at Maria. “You—a gentleman, and a prince, so they tell me, in your own country. Fie, sir! Maria, I’m ashamed of you.”

Geegee skipped suddenly with his chair to a considerable distance from the lady, and his grin was of disconcertion.

Maria laughed a little defiantly, but her face and neck were fiery red.

“I perceive that you wish to be alone,” said Brown Geegee, rising abruptly and holding out his hand to the tobacconist, who was looking daggers at Maria. “I have trespassed too long. Not a word, I beseech you. You are my friend, and I understand. It is, moreover, natural that you and my sweet-honey Maria should desire to converse together. Adieu—nice dreams. I will inform Blackstone of your rejoicing. Farewell.”

And, kissing his slender fingers with a parting leer to

Maria, the coloured gentleman shuffled out of the room and into the dark passage.

“Wait for me here, Maria,” whispered Harry Jones, with stern meaning. And he went to open the door for the departing guest.

Now, whether it was that Maria’s eyes were exceptionally blue that night, or her cheeks exceptionally rosy, or whether it was that the gown she wore lent exceptional charms to her figure, who shall venture to say? But certain it is that a burning jealousy bade fair to consume Mr. Jones from the moment he beheld Mr. Geegee’s arm about her waist, and divined that Mr. Geegee’s lips had been pressed to that comely cheek of hers. He had a liking for the girl, and had found pleasure in her company of late. But he had always regarded her as a servant, vastly his inferior, and had been a little pleased with his condescension in having her to sit with him in the evenings and help him with the accounts. Now that he was obliged to confess himself disappointed, he looked back upon his former opinion of her with new vision. She had charms; her eyes were blue—corn-flower blue almost. Though of a somewhat gross habit of body, he found her form agreeable. It suggested homely comfort, ease, and well-cooked plenty, with a comfortable pipe beside the kitchen fire—suggestions by no means distasteful to Mr. Jones’s mind. Jealousy struck the scales from his eyes, so that, for the first time, he saw her with the eyes of love.

“Maria,” he said grimly, confronting her on his return from the street-door, “Maria, I’m ashamed of you.”

“What for, I should like to know?” she asked, smiling at him provokingly.

“What for—you ’ave the face to ask me that?” said Harry Jones, in a choking voice. “Maria, I should never ’ve thought it of you. And Mr. Geegee too—a perfect stranger, as you may say, and a coloured chap into the

bargain. If anyone 'd told me "as much, I'd 've struck 'im in the mouth for a liar. I'd 've said, 'She isn't the girl to let liberties be taken with 'er.' I'd give a good deal not to 've seen what I 'ave seen to-night."

Maria's eyes were cast down. She was busily brushing some imaginary dust from the bosom of her dress.

"Do you think I care for 'im?" she murmured, with scornful emphasis. "Why, 'e ain't no more to me than this table—not so much! Only I was that 'appy to 'ear them Courts was took, I didn't care, and 'e was funny with 'is antics, for all the world like a monkey on an organ. I never thought you'd mind so . . . I'd never . . . I'm a pore orphan with no one . . . if I'd thought—. . . Oh, Mr. Jones, 'ow cruel you are!"

She sobbed, plucking at the table-cloth. Mr. Jones was drawn to her side. The coloured gentleman had set a good example. Her waist was yielding, pleasant to the touch. It may have been that she had forgotten to put on her stays that evening. There was whispering, dappled with soft, sibilant sounds. The lamp shone on a small man embracing a stalwart woman. And Maria went to bed that night with the near prospect of a proprietary interest in the Mixture and the Blend.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

IN WHICH MR. JONES IS FINALLY TAMED, AND MR. LEE-STRETTON WRITES A HOPEFUL LETTER TO HIS MOTHER.

“I CONGRATULATE you, Jones—wish you every happiness from the bottom of my heart,” said Sir Arthur Blackstone. He slapped the sheep-faced tobacconist on the shoulder.

It was in the dining-room of Mr. Samuel Thompson’s house, and the hour was half-past nine in the morning. Sunlight, misty and vague, such as London in genial mood doles out to her children, played upon the heavy, dark-stained sideboard, and upon a still darker oil-painting above it, wherein a ghostly light-house and nothing else was discernible. Having served the early morning rush of customers—city men and others on their way to the station, who were in the habit of dashing into his shop to fill their pouches for the day—Harry Jones had swallowed a hurried breakfast, and was come post-haste to inform his patron that he hoped shortly to be a married man. His motives for this prompt, not to say precipitate, disclosure were two-fold. In the first place, he remembered the parting leer of Brown Geegee on the previous night, and wished to preclude all renewal of the coloured gentleman’s attentions to Maria. In the second place, he considered himself a sort of vassal of Sir Arthur Blackstone, and felt bound to seek his lord’s approval of the important step he was taking. There was, besides, a hope Maria had breathed into him, that Sir Arthur might like to be present at the wedding—a real, live • baronet—a thing to set all Walhall Green talking for a fortnight!

Blackstone held a table-napkin crumpled in his left hand. His jaws were still working upon something, which, by a subtle flavour that was in the air, might well have been smoked haddock.

"Come and have some breakfast, Jones, won't you?" he said, slapping the tobacconist on the back. "You can tell us the whole story comfortably. We're just beginning on some stringy fish and muddy coffee, if you don't mind that sort of thing. We've a good hour till Sammy comes down. Come on, man," as Harry hesitated and looked shy. "There's only Geegee, and Bunny, and myself—all old friends. Come along."

Of a sudden Mr. Jones became rigid.

"I must ask you to excuse me, Sir Arthur. Ever since I 'eard that She was engaged to Another, I've 'ated that Other like poison. Even now that I'm a changed man, I wouldn't sit down and eat along with 'im, not for untold gold, I wouldn't."

"But you're engaged to Another yourself, aren't you? Or what's all this you've been telling me about Maria? That ought to make a difference."

Harry Jones scratched his head with a puzzled expression.

"It makes a difference, sir, of course; but not that much. If you don't mind, I'd rather not."

"Well, well," said Blackstone cheerily, "I often feel like that myself, when I think that in another month they'll be man and wife. Must you go?"

Sir Arthur showed his visitor out at the front door, repeating his congratulations and shaking hands. Before Harry had gone many steps, he called after him :

"I say, Jones! You take lodgers, don't you?"

"I 'aven't, not so far; but I'm on the look-out for some."

"Well, what do you say to Bunny—Mr. Lee-Stretton? He wants rooms somewhere out of the way for three weeks.

He'd pay well, and he'd only be there from Saturday to Monday. You see, he can't very well have the banns asked in our parish, because Sammy, or Susan his wife, might happen to go to church one of those Sundays and catch him at it; so he's going to ask leave to spend three consecutive week-ends with a maiden aunt at Putney, or Fulham, or somewhere, and he's on the look-out for a lodging. Can you take him in?"

"I'd do most things to oblige you, Sir Arthur,"—Harry Jones took off his hat, and gazed ruefully into the crown thereof—"but not that. I should do 'im a mischief, I'm sure I should, if left alone with 'im at any time. But under such aggravatin' circumstances, as the newspapers say, I fear I should strike such a blow upon that rabbit mouth of 'is, as 'd send all his teeth chatterin' into 'is stomach. Ask me anythin' but that, Sir Arthur."

"What a queer chap you are, Jones. You'll be having Maria jealous, if you don't look out. Well, to oblige me, look out for a bedroom and sitting-room in your neighbourhood. It needn't be in the same parish. It doesn't matter to him where the banns are given out, so long as it's in some church or other. Look out for the rooms, there's a good chap."

Harry Jones replaced his hat thoughtfully upon his head and shook both.

"All right, Sir Arthur—to oblige you! But I wonder at you, I must say, bein' in love with Milly Woodward yourself, takin' so much trouble about gettin' 'er married to another."

And Blackstone wondered too, as he watched the dapper form of the little tobacconist recede and diminish down the long vista of the misty street.

Mr. Jones was as good as his word. That very evening, after business hours, he set out, arm-in-arm with Maria, in search of suitable lodgings for a single gentleman. And on



the third day he called again in Tenby Gardens with a note for Sir Arthur Blackstone, Bart.

"Mrs. Wimple, number twelve, Rosemary Street, Chelsea," was the address on the card enclosed.

Blackstone handed it to Bunny, who went forthwith and engaged the rooms.

All this business about the banns, and the elaborate deceit it entailed, made Mr. Lee-Stretton feel unpleasantly like a criminal. He was generally morose now, when alone, and irritable in company. Blackstone was his only friend and confidant, and even he had grown less comforting of late, seeming to find some mysterious satisfaction in dwelling upon the seamy side of every topic. If poor Bunny was gloomy throughout the week, there was certainly nothing to brighten the hours from Saturday evening to Monday morning, spent alone in that dejected little sitting-room in Rosemary Street, with its heart-broken furniture and the mourning prints upon the walls, or in the bedroom with its outlook upon the monuments of a stone-mason's yard. Faces of his mother, his father, his sister frowned reproachful upon his lonely musings. The banns had been asked once already, so there was no going back. He was forced to look forward, and the prospect made him very miserable. Was ever fellow in such an awkward position? He could have wept for pity of himself.

Very early on a typical April morning, when the wet streets glistened and sparkled in a flood of sunshine between two showers, Harry Jones emerged from the private door of his house. He was arrayed as a bridegroom, and Maria, dressed and veiled in white, hung upon his arm. A fly was in waiting to take them to the church hard by. The coachman had a white favour at his button-hole, and a bow of white ribbon fluttered on his whip. The shutters of the shop were up, and a charwoman, broom in hand, grinned a blessing upon them as they drove off.

At the church door was Sir Arthur Blackstone, in frock coat and high hat, with Brown Geegee in attendance, sucking the ivory handle of his cane and leering cunningly. Mr. Twinkler and his wife were installed in the front pew of all, and there was a light sprinkling of the curious unemployed in the body of the church. Percy Woodward suddenly appeared from the vestry, where he had been telling the parson all about the Debating Society, and, with a whisper of "Hope you're well, Sir Arthur," took possession of Mr. Jones in the capacity of best man. That was Blackstone's arrangement, to cement the reconciliation of old friends; he himself having agreed to figure as the bride's father for the nonce.

The ceremony passed off without a hitch. Harry Jones was less nervous than could be expected, and Maria's responses, pronounced in a tone of argument, were distinctly audible, even in the gallery. Of course there was kissing in the vestry afterwards. Sir Arthur Blackstone saluted the bride, and so did Percy Woodward, and Mr. Twinkler, and Mrs. Twinkler; and so also did Brown Geegee again and again, with grimacing and honeyed words, until Harry Jones, a little irritated, exclaimed, "Come, come, Mr. Geegee, Mrs. Jones 'as 'ad enough o' that!"

"Farewell! Enjoy yourself with her! Good-bye! Hurrah! God bless you!" crowed the coloured gentleman with infantile delight, as the carriage drove off with the newly-married pair and the Twinklers, on their way to the shop, where Maria would change her garments and the guests would refresh themselves before proceeding to a tremendous breakfast at Richmond. And he flung his last remaining handful of rice high into the air, so that it fell upon his own shoulders and those of Mr. Woodward and Sir Arthur Blackstone, standing on either side of him.

"Don't be a fool, Geegee, or I'll go for you," said Blackstone warningly. "Can't you see all these roughs are

laughing at us? Now, let's go and have breakfast somewhere before going home. You'll join us, Woodward?"

"I'm afraid I can't, much as I should like to," said Percy, rubbing his hands a little sadly. "'Needs must when the devil drives,' as the poet so forcibly puts it." He looked at his watch. "I'm due at the bank in a quarter of an hour. Good-bye, Sir Arthur; good-bye, Mr. Geegee. Hope to see you again soon."

Blackstone was very well pleased with the morning's work, as he sat at breakfast with Geegee in the clean-swept parlour of a public-house. He wished Millicent to be well informed of the happy ending to the story of Harry Jones, and for that reason, among others, had prevailed upon Percy to act as best man to his quondam friend and colleague. He knew she would be pleased with the turn events had taken, and only wished he could be there to hear the expression of her pleasure. He was in high spirits when he sat down to breakfast. But by and by, when the excitement of the incident was spent, he began to think gloomily of that other wedding which was less than three weeks distant. The banns had been asked once already. There was no hope of reprieve—not the least, unless Bunny's people should get wind of his purpose, which seemed the remotest of all contingencies just then. Geegee watched his big friend furtively out of the corners of his almond eyes, while he crammed his mouth with eatables. It was dangerous to disturb Blackstone when he had that frown on his forehead, the coloured gentlemen knew well; so he said nothing, but made a hearty breakfast.

"What a lucky young hound you are!" said Blackstone to Bunny, on the following Saturday, when the latter was on the point of setting out for those clandestine rooms of his in Rosemary Street, Chelsea. "It must make you feel awfully jolly to hear your name and hers coupled together in church."

“Yes, of course,” assented Bunny doubtfully. “But I say, you know! It’s awful rot my people not knowing. I can’t feel quite happy about it, when I think of them. There’ll be a devil of a row when they find out—don’t you think, Blackstone? I’m afraid they’ll disown me and all that!”

“Of course there’ll be a shindy. I thought you’d made up your mind to face that!” said Blackstone, in a tone of surprise. “What an ass you are, young ’un, always shilly-shallying, stopping to look back when you’ve got a rare good time to look forward to. Pull yourself together, man! Your people can’t do much, except talk. It’s not a crime, hang it!”

Bunny found little consolation in his friend’s remarks. It was not consoling either, when he went into Sammy’s study to take his leave, to hear the little old tutor say, “I hope you will find your aunt in good health. My compliments to her if you please.” It recalled too vividly the long chain of untruths he had forged for himself, of which this legend of his aunt at Fulham was the newest link. By the time he reached Mrs. Wimple’s lodgings, and had given that excellent widow his orders concerning supper, he was a prey to the deepest melancholy. And the next morning he awoke to the like dismal train of thought.

Sunday is always a dreary day for the lonely, in London more than elsewhere, by reason of the shops that are shut and the crowds of people looking uncomfortable in their best clothes. Bunny had no wish to go to church, to hear a formal charge of deceiving his parents brought against him solemnly by the mouth of a priest. Still less did he feel any desire to wander amid the Sabbath desolation of the streets. So he spent all the morning in the little sitting-room, reading back-numbers of the Parish Magazine, which was all the literature the book-shelf afforded; glancing round sometimes with a yawn upon the lugubrious furniture,

sometimes, also with a yawn, looking out of the window. By the afternoon he had sunk to such a depth of boredom and despondency that he hailed the advent of his landlady bringing the tea, with joy, as a godsend.

It was the servant's afternoon out, Mrs. Wimple informed him, apologising for her appearance in person. She was a widow lady, vast, heaving, and lachrymose, dispiriting as the rooms she let. Yet Bunny placed a chair for her and listened to her detailed account of the latest murder, and her wail over the horror of it, with a seemly show of interest. He was so sick of being alone that even such shambles-talk as this was welcome to him. But when she was gone and only the memory of her conversation remained, without the human company which had made it bearable, black despair gripped hold of him. The consciousness of sin was heavy upon him; it was more than he could bear. Something must be done to alleviate it, or he would sink under the burden. There was an antique ink-stand on the table in the window. A pen with a bone handle lay beside it. He had note-paper in his bag.

He sat down to the table and wrote :

“DEAR MOTHER,—I am going to be married to Miss Millicent Woodward, an awfully nice girl. The wedding is to take place on the 25th of this month. I am sure you will all like her, especially Katie. I am so happy that I do not know what to do with myself.

“Your loving son,

“DOUGLAS.”

He bought a penny stamp of Mrs. Wimple, and the missive was actually lodged in a pillar-box before nightfall. But no sooner was the letter posted than a reaction set in. For full half an hour before midnight, a wild-eyed Bunny with crumpled collar and tie awry, walked up and down in the neighbourhood of that pillar-box.

“I say, you know! There’s a letter of mine in there,” he said, when the postman at length appeared. “I want it back, if you please. Here’s half a crown!”

But the postman was surly and looked askance at the coin.

“It can’t be done,” he said, kneeling to unlock the box. “It’s as much as my place is worth!”

“But I say, you know—”

“It can’t be done, I tell yer!” interrupted the postman angrily, sweeping the letters by handfuls into his sack. “You don’t expect me to stop ’ere all night, lookin’ at every single letter till I come to yours, do yer?”

So Bunny went back to his lodgings distracted, to a bed where no rest was, to listen through the long watches of the night to the trumpet-like snoring of his landlady in the room above. He would have given much more than half a crown to recall that letter.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN WHICH AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN APPEARS AS A CHURCHGOER, AND MISS WOODWARD FAINTS, MOST UNMAIDENLY, INTO THE ARMS OF A YOUNG MAN.

“WHAT’S your religion, Geegee?” asked Sir Arthur Blackstone of the coloured gentleman, as they sat together at breakfast in the class-room on the morning of that identical Sunday. Brown Geegee grinned, protesting that he didn’t know. He had not yet made up his mind. There were so many religions in the world, and they all had so many inconveniences, that he found it hard to make a choice.

Blackstone stroked his moustache and surveyed him thoughtfully.

“I wonder whether it ’d be sacrilege or anything, if I were to take you to church,” he said. “I’ve never had to do with a heathen in that line before. Look here, image; it’s time you were converted.”

Brown Geegee spread out his hands in deprecation. He had been often to church since his coming to England, he said; notably to the wedding of his friend Jones that very week. He would accompany Blackstone to any place of worship he liked to mention. Conversion was unnecessary, in his opinion, seeing that he was fully qualified as a church-goer without it.

Blackstone still stroked his moustache thoughtfully.

“Well, look here, you brazen idol, you’ll have to behave yourself. It’s not a wedding this time, you see. It’s a serious service; and, if they catch you making faces or any of your humbug, they’ll chuck you out, and make it

confoundedly hot for you into the bargain. I'm going to hear Bunny's banns given out."

Brown Geegee was eager in promising to be solemn as an owl.

"I may perhaps see my dear beautiful Miss Woodward there!" he added, as a joyful after-thought.

"Not much chance of that," said Blackstone, rising and pushing back his chair. "It's time we started, Geegee."

Millicent Woodward was not feeling very well that morning; she had not been quite herself for many days. Percy began to fear for her looks. He recommended her, with a brotherly pat, to get some roses into her cheeks before the twenty-fifth, or she would have Lee-Stretton crying off at the last minute.

"Come, Mil; you mustn't really go on like this," he said at breakfast. He rubbed his hands and smiled pleasantly at his sister, shaking his head the while with mock severity.

"This won't do, you know. You'll be a living skeleton on your wedding-day at this rate. Come, cheer up, old girl. Only ten days more and you'll be Mrs. Lee-Stretton—as happy as a queen, I'll be bound. I shall tell him how you've been pining for him, and I bet he'll be flattered. Cheer up, and give us a kiss."

But although she conceded the kiss, as in duty bound, Millicent was not one whit more cheerful for his well-meant assurance. How foolish she had been to submit to the naming of a day. But Percy and her mother had proved too many for her. Their importunities had amounted to persecution, and she had humoured them for the sake of peace, wildly hoping that after all something might happen to prevent the sacrifice. Now it was too late. The banns were to be asked that morning for the second time. How could she tell Percy that his sister, on the eve of her marriage to one man, was madly in love with another?



“Got a headache?” he asked. “You’d better not go to church this morning. Stay at home and lie down—that’s your ticket. You’ll be as right as a trivet by dinner-time.”

“I think I’d rather go to church,” said Millicent meekly.

Percy rubbed his hands and smiled knowingly. “Aha! you can’t keep away from hearing your name coupled with his. I know you!”

“I think I shall go upstairs now and get ready,” she said, in the same subdued tone. “I shall go and hear the banns at the other church this morning.”

“On the off-chance of meeting him—eh?” Percy chuckled at his own discernment. “You’re a nice sort of girl, I must say. When I took the trouble of asking him not to call or see you before the wedding-day, so that you shouldn’t be sick of one another to start with! And here are you, breaking through all rules and running off to meet him.”

Millicent went upstairs and, after a quarter of an hour, came down again, dressed for church.

“You haven’t been long,” said Percy, putting his head out at the dining-room door. “Blowed if I ever knew you dress so quick before in your life. He’s a powerful magnet, is my future brother-in-law.”

Millicent said coldly: “Good-bye till dinner-time.”

“Good-bye, old girl; I’d go with you myself, only I’ve got a bit of a cold that wants nursing. Besides, I shouldn’t like to spoil sport.”

With this final sally he closed the door, and returned to his arm-chair to chuckle it over at leisure.

As Millicent made her way through the quiet streets that Sunday morning, a vague hope was in her heart that there might be some irregularity about the banns at Bunny’s church; that the clergyman would forget to read them, that something would happen to cause a postponement of the wedding. The fresh spring air, blowing in from the country

with a suggestion of budding hedgerows, of primrose and violet, fanned her cheeks, seeming to bid her hope. There was hope also in the floating sunshine, in the clearness of the atmosphere, pure from recent showers. Even the people in the streets, going churchwards in their Sunday clothes, with faces composed upon serious Sunday lines, caused her but a moment's depression which passed with them. She had not felt so hopeful for weeks.

It had been a trying time for her, ever since the date of the wedding had been fixed irrevocably. Each day had brought with it some new form of humiliation. Neighbours and old school-friends called to congratulate her, and wedding-presents began to arrive. Mrs. Woodward lived in a constant fluster about the trousseau, spending most of her time in turning over the pages of fashion-papers, ready with a new suggestion whenever Milly entered her room. As for the bride-elect herself, her purchases were soon made, and she found some slight relief from thought in the mechanical work of stitching and embroidery. Rose Langley came often to see her in the evenings, and on Saturday afternoons. She would sit and reason with her by the hour. It was not too late, she insisted. Why not write at once and break it off? But Millicent, through a mistaken sense of honour, was inexorable in her self-sacrifice. She wished that she had stipulated to keep her place at the office till the very last. Those long days, with nothing to think of, nothing to talk of but the wedding, were unbearable.

The members of the Debating Society called one evening in a body, to discuss the question of a wedding gift to Miss Woodward. Each was willing to subscribe the sum of ten shillings, if Percy would suggest some present at once useful and ornamental. After some show of deprecation and much rubbing of his hands, the Premier remarked casually that a centre-piece for a dinner-table was a useful article in

a house where "swagger" parties were often given, as would be the case in the abode of his future brother-in-law, Lee-Stretton. He further let fall an opinion that you couldn't have too much plate in an establishment of that kind.

Then came a pleasing speech by Elf, every word of which was applauded by Bert. The honourable member spoke of the contracting parties as if they had been two steeds whose points he admired. He referred to his friend Percy, as "own brother to Miss Woodward," to Mrs. Woodward and the late lamented Mr. W. as the "dam" and the "sire." He expressed his approval of the breed in no measured terms, and ventured to hope that it might never die out; finally suggesting a "pram," or perambulator—a double "pram," if he might make so bold—as a delicate hint to the loving pair of what was expected of them, and an inducement to continue in the same all the days of their life.

But Percy, though he thanked the speaker with tears in his eyes for his handsome offer, thought that the gift had better take some other form. A "pram" was a little too personal—a trifle too pointed, if he might be allowed the expression. He tried to picture his sister's face upon receiving such a present, and gave up the attempt with a shudder.

After some further discussion, the little man who had a cousin in America, and who, moreover, had a wife at home, proposed a "thorough good dressing-case, fitted with all the etceteras," as the form of present most suitable to a young wife. And the other members reflecting that the little man ought to know, if anyone did, the proposal was adopted unanimously.

Millicent had been extremely annoyed when she heard of the proceedings afterwards from Percy's lips. Why could not people leave her alone, she wondered, when all she

asked was to be left alone? Could they not see how wretched she was? Altogether it had been a trying time for her. No wonder that she was weak and unwell. Surely no one but a brother would have let her walk so far to church alone, with that pale face and those dark circles round her eyes. She might faint in the street, or the atmosphere of a crowded church might well prove too much for her. Percy sat snug in his arm-chair at home, with a pipe in his mouth and a Sunday paper in his hands. Sambo lay curled up on the rug at his feet. He wondered that his sister should care for the trouble of going to morning service—that was all. And Lee-Stretton explained that somewhat.

The church which Mr. Lee-Stretton had chosen for his clandestine purpose was a bran-new structure of red brick, wedged in a street of small houses, above whose chimneys its slate roof rose high, like a section of the back of some huge fish. To reach it Milly had to traverse an unsavoury passage between iron posts, which gave access to a street of high houses, whose damaged railings, broken windows, and general air of dilapidation—not to speak of the dirty children playing on the doorsteps—bore witness to the poverty of their inmates. Almost involuntarily she quickened her pace, clutching her purse more tightly in her hand. It was with a sigh of relief that she emerged into a road of small but respectable dwellings, and beheld the church, end and object of her walk, not many yards distant.

All seats were free, the verger said in reply to her question. He was an austere young man, with a clean-shaven face, and had the appearance of a priest in his long cassock, girt with a cord at the waist. He answered her question curtly, waving his hand to the left side of the church as the region appropriate to her sex.

A vague sense of shame and a shrinking from observation

prompted her to seek a chair behind a pillar, whence she could see the altar and the lectern, but was herself the least conspicuous of all the worshippers. She had a foreboding that Douglas would be there to hear the banns; and to be seen and recognised by him was the last thing she wished. A feeling of calm after a storm stole over her, as she knelt behind her pillar. She was cloistered for a space from the world with all its cares and worries. The clangour of the bell reached her ears with a muffled sound, as of something very far away. The shaded light from a memorial window fell slantwise upon the pillar and upon the pavement of the aisle, with a stain of amethyst and amber. The crimson glow from a saint's robe was about her head.

The bell ceased, and she became suddenly aware that the church was full of people. A tremulous ripple of sound thrilled the building, dying away in a murmur along the vaulted roof. Then a full wave of harmony filled every corner of the church, the choir passed into the chancel, and the service began.

"I publish the banns of marriage between Douglas Lee-Stretton, bachelor, of this parish, and Millicent Woodward—"

The spell was broken. She could hardly repress a cry as the words rang through the church. She looked round with a crimson face, fearing lest she had indeed exclaimed aloud. But the congregation were busy fluttering the leaves of their books to find the hymn that was to follow. Then everyone stood up, she with them, leaning upon the pillar for support.

"What a giant!" she thought, looking across to the men's seats. And then in a flash came recognition, making her tremble from head to foot.

"Are you ill?" a lady leaned forward and asked in a whisper. "Shall I help you out?"

"It's nothing, thank you," murmured Millicent, looking

round with a scared face, and she sat down until the hymn was over.

She slipped out before the sermon very quietly, hoping to avoid notice. Turning at the door, she was conscious of a pair of bright almond eyes leering at her out of a puckered face, and of a very tall man coming down the aisle.

She turned deadly pale, and rushed out into the street. The verger, picking up a glass of water, which always stood on his table in case of emergency, followed her with the gravity and deliberation of a medical man. But by the time he reached the street, she was already many yards distant, hurrying for her life. Finding himself baffled, he smiled an ascetic smile, and was turning to re-enter the church, when he was almost overset by the outward rush of a giant, dragging a coloured gentleman by the arm. The tumbler splintered to a dozen fragments upon the stone steps, and the water sought its own level by a series of tiny cascades.

In her dread of meeting the man she loved, Millicent turned first to the right, then to the left, then to the left again, regardless of direction, caring not whither she went, so that she might shake off her pursuers. Now running, now walking at the top of her speed, she threaded a tortuous way among the streets and alleys, turning wherever a corner was, darting down dingy passages, with the simple cunning of a hunted thing, making no headway whatever.

At length, turning down a passage between iron posts, she found herself, to her horror, face to face with the very man she was fleeing from. It was too much for her. In a state of weakness, almost hysterical, she clung to the railings for support. The street swam before her eyes. There was a strange singing in her ears. The forms of Blackstone and Brown Geegee seemed to draw very near, to dilate, and then to vanish altogether. She staggered, and fell lifeless into a pair of strong arms.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

IN WHICH SIR ARTHUR BLACKSTONE BEGINS TO ENTERTAIN HOPE FOR THE FUTURE.

“RUN for your life, Geegee!” said Blackstone, turning a woeful face to the coloured gentleman. “Fetch a doctor at once!”

“I think she only faints,” said Brown Geegee, with a distressed grin. “I will borrow some nice clean water from somebody.”

Certain stalwart matrons of unkempt aspect had detached themselves from neighbouring doorsteps, where they had been fixtures all the morning, and now formed a sympathetic group about the three.

“Ah, poor dear,” one of them exclaimed, “it’s the weather’s upset her, I’ll be bound! No wonder, I’m sure; I feels it myself.”

Brown Geegee, encouraged by the evident compassion of the speaker, raised his hat, and bowing profoundly, craved the loan of “some nice clean water.”

The woman gave a loud guffaw.

“Well, I never! For all the world like a monkey on a organ, ain’t ’e, Missis Barney? ’Ere, Jenny,” laying rough hold of a little girl who was clinging to her skirts, and shaking her, “jest you run and bring a mug o’ water ’s fast as your legs can carry you! None o’ your loit’rin’, mind! And if you spill one drop it’ll be the worse for you!”

But even before the child came running back with the water, Millicent began to give signs of a return to consciousness. Her lips parted, and her bosom heaved with a sigh.

“Undo the front of ’er dress, guv’nor,” said an old hag, with a rasping voice. “Give ’er room to breathe!”

It seemed like sacrilege to Blackstone, but he obeyed nevertheless. Then the water was brought, and he sprinkled her face and neck with it, kneeling, her head upon his shoulder. A feather of her hat tickled his face uncomfortably, and the hat itself—a dainty confection of Milly’s own—got sadly pushed about and crushed. But Blackstone cared not a jot in either case; he was holding her in his arms. All the Bunnies in the world, with their jealous “I say, you know!” could not rob him of the memory of that moment. He was almost sorry when she at length opened her eyes. Looking round bewildered upon so many strange faces, she clung close to him and sobbed, with cheek pressed to his coat.

“Mistakes me for Bunny,” he thought, reddening with embarrassment as the unkempt matrons tittered. He exclaimed hastily:

“Come along, Geegee! We must get her away from here as quick as possible. You take one arm and I’ll take the other. She’s only half conscious as yet.”

Brown Geegee did as he was bidden; and a mouldy man, who had elbowed his way between two portly dames, and stood there comfortably wedged between those living cushions, vouchsafed certain directions, chiefly public-houses, by which they were to find the nearest cab-stand. Then, as all prospect of excitement was at an end, the matrons returned to their respective doorsteps, and the mouldy man slouched off up the street.

Blackstone, feebly assisted by Brown Geegee, half carried, half led Millicent in the direction indicated. Their progress was of necessity very slow, for she was still faint and dizzy, needing support for every step. The trio was a peculiar one, apt to call forth the gibes of loafers at any street corner. Blackstone was so big, Brown Geegee was so



brown, his collar so white and his tie so red, and Millicent was so pretty, in spite of her pallor and dishevelment.

Blackstone was glad that Millicent was still too dazed to comprehend the ribald remarks passed upon them—very thankful when at length they reached the cab-stand. Having lifted her into a four-wheeler, he ordered the cabman to drive to Twinkler and Jones, tobacconists, at Walham Green.

“It’s the nearest place,” he explained to Brown Geegee, as he took his seat beside that gentleman, with his back to the horse. “She can rest there a bit, and have something to eat and drink before going home.”

Millicent was leaning back in her corner, with closed eyes.

“Hush!” whispered the coloured gentleman, laying a finger to his lip and glancing at her. “My beautiful Miss Woodward slumbers; let us not disturb her with loud conversation. I think you do well to convey her to my friend Jones; he is a nice chap, and he loves her. Moreover, there is Maria, who will be to her like a mother.”

Blackstone rejoined in the same tone, “That’s exactly what I was thinking—about Maria, I mean! Confound these four-wheelers! Their rattling is enough to give anyone a headache. They ought to stick sandbags about, or something, to deaden the noise!”

But rattling is as much part of a four-wheeled cab as advertisements are of an omnibus. Stop the rattling and you might as well have a private carriage at once! So the cab rattled all the way to Walham Green, nor ceased from rattling until it drew up with a jerk at the door of Harry Jones’s dwelling. But Millicent seemed not to notice it. She lay back in her corner with closed eyes, only opening them when the rattling ceased and Blackstone put his arm about her to help her to alight.

Mr. Jones, apprised of the catastrophe by a voluble inroad

of Brown Geegee, came out, wringing his hands, his face pale with emotion. In their eagerness to be of use both he and Geegee greatly impeded Blackstone, getting entangled with his legs and doing their best to trip him up. Having quite enough to do to support Miss Woodward, without the hindrance of these well-meant manœuvres, the baronet exclaimed, "Here, Jones! Run indoors and tell Maria! . . . Now, then, Geegee! Go and pay the cabby, there's a good chap!"

The two bustling off on their respective errands, he was able to convey his charge to the back-parlour.

Very tenderly he laid her down upon the sofa in the sitting-room, gently loosening the hands which had tightened about his neck.

"Poor little girl!" he muttered, standing to look at her as she lay listless with closed eyes. "Thinks I'm Bunny, worse luck! I expect she'd be more comfortable with her hat off, but hanged if I know how to do it! Pins somewhere, I suppose!"

Maria entering, in a bustle of solicitude, Blackstone withdrew discreetly to the shop to nurse his anxiety and kick his heels to the accompaniment of Brown Geegee's magpie chatter, and the perpetual "Well, I never! Did you ever, Mr. Geegee?" of Harry Jones.

At length the tobacconist stole on tiptoe to the door of the back-room—a quite unnecessary precaution, considering that he had been talking in a loud voice, and must certainly have disturbed the patient, if the patient were susceptible of disturbance—and knocked softly with his knuckles upon the glass panel. Maria opened to him, and a whispered colloquy ensued, in the course of which Harry Jones slapped his knee several times, and gave other unmistakable signs of delight. His face beaming with satisfaction, he stole back to the counter.

"Sir Arthur!" he whispered. "She's asleep, sir, and

doin' nicely! Would you mind steppin' outside with me a minute? Mr. Geegee 'll excuse us, I'm sure!"

He led Blackstone to the street door and, seizing the lowest button of his coat, whispered: "She don't love 'im!"

"What do you mean?" said Blackstone fiercely.

"That's just what I'm going to tell you!" Harry Jones raised the forefinger of his right hand, with intent to emphasise each point of his discourse by a stroke upon the baronet's waistcoat. "When you were gone, Maria saw 'er gropin' about, as if to cuddle somebody, and 'eard 'er mutterin' 'Where is 'e?'"

The finger came down upon the waistcoat.

"I know," Blackstone put in. "She thought I was—"

"Wait till you 'ear all I've got to say!" interrupted Harry, the finger again raised. "Maria 'eard' er sayin' that, and saw 'er gropin' about. So she went up to 'er and said, 'What is it, my pretty?' And then she whispered a name—A NAME!"

Another stroke of the forefinger upon the waistcoat.

"I know," muttered Blackstone, very pale, in spite of the sunburn, which was chronic with him. "She mistook me for Bunny all along!"

"Bunny!" echoed Mr. Jones, in tones of the deepest scorn and contempt. "Bunny, indeed! I knew she couldn't love 'im—from the very first I knew it! That's what made me so mad! I ask you, sir, is 'is name Arthur? Milly Woodward whispered 'Arthur.' She said, 'Where is Arthur?' Maria can take her Bible oath to it! Is 'is name Arthur? Why, of course it isn't! 'Ooever thought it was? I tell you she asked for Arthur, and so all you 'ave to do is to go in and win. There's my advice to you. Go in and win, and love, cherish, and obey, till death shall you part, all the days of your life, amen!"

The finger came down a score of times in quick succession.

If Mr. Jones had been wearing a hat at that moment, he would certainly have thrown it up into the air. As it was his feelings found vent in a species of war-dance upon the pavement—a performance which raised him inches higher in the estimation of such urchins and mudlarks of Walham Green as were privileged to witness it.

“Go in and win,” he repeated excitedly. “That’s my advice. Go in and win!”

But Blackstone remained outside, and there was no light of victory in his face as he leaned against the doorpost. He took his pipe from his pocket, looked at it thoughtfully, and then handed it to Harry Jones.

“Give me a fill,” he said. “I can think better when I’m smoking, and I’ve left my pouch at home, like a fool.”

Mr. Jones bustled into the shop, returning shortly with a pipeful of the purest happiness in the one hand and a box of vestas in the other.

“May I tell Mr. Geegee?” he asked, in a low tone, as the first puff of smoke came from Blackstone’s lips. “’E’s a friend of both parties, and ’e’s just dyin’ to know what we’ve been whisperin’ about.”

“Certainly not,” said Blackstone, upon reflection.

Whereupon Mr. Jones went back into the shop, to tantalise Brown Geegee with a bewilderment of dark sayings and knowing winks.

Blackstone joined them at last. “I say, Jones,” he said, “just inquire how Miss Woodward is getting on. I think we’d better send her home if she’s at all fit. Her people will be getting anxious. I suppose you won’t mind letting Maria go in the cab with her, eh?”

“But, Sir Arthur!” gasped Harry Jones. “You remember what I told you! Go in and win, you know!”

Blackstone said coldly, “Do as I tell you, there’s a good chap.”

Brown Geegee leered frightfully. "Maria need not trouble herself to go. I will myself escort the dear sweet-sugar young lady to her parent's arms."

Blackstone scared the coloured gentleman with a threatening look, and repeated his request that Harry Jones would inquire how Miss Woodward did.

"She was all right now," Maria said; "only a bit shaken, poor dear. She was quite well enough to go home." So, when Milly had been roused and made tidy, Maria went upstairs to don her out-door apparel, and Blackstone, beckoning to Brown Geegee, prepared to take his leave.

Harry Jones was in great distress. "Won't you go and speak a word to her, Sir Arthur?" he pleaded. "Just a word or two to clinch the matter, and cut another out for ever!"

Blackstone was moody. "No, not to-day. I'll call in the course of to-morrow and we'll talk it over. There may be some mistake. I must be quite sure before I take any steps."

"It means everything to me, you see," he added, almost apologetically.

Harry Jones was disappointed, and was at no pains to hide his chagrin. Still, there was a fierce light in the baronet's eyes, which, he thought, boded no good to that supercilious idiot with the rabbit-mouth.

"Good-bye, Sir Arthur. I shall look out for you in the morning," he said, shaking hands at the street-door. "Good-bye, Mr. Geegee. 'Ope you'll drop in to-morrow evening as usual, sir."

"What a pity," he muttered, as he re-entered the shop. "'E may never 'ave such another chance again. I'd sooner lose Milly Woodward to a man like Sir Arthur Blackstone than 'ave 'er myself—blowed if I wouldn't! Pity 'e should go off without so much as wishin' 'er good-bye. It's funny I'm not a bit jealous of 'im—funny I should like Maria just

the same with 'er in the 'ouse." He scratched his head "They're as different as chalk from cheese. I see the difference there is, and yet I like Maria." It was the difference of the drawing-room and the kitchen. Heredity bade Mr. Jones prefer the kitchen, except on State occasions.

Blackstone had not gone far. He lingered at the corner of the street, in spite of Geegee's frequent hints that it was near lunch-time, until he had seen a hansom drive by, and had caught a glimpse of Milly's face, so patrician in its pallor, contrasted with Maria's full-blown visage. Then he turned, and, calling to Brown Geegee, strode resolutely homeward with long, elastic strides, the coloured gentleman shuffling and panting to keep up with him.

## CHAPTER XXX.

OF THE ARRIVAL IN TOWN OF CAPTAIN LEE-STRETTON AND HIS WARDER, OF THE DISCOMFITURE OF MR. THOMPSON, THE FORWARDNESS OF A YOUNG LADY, AND THE UTTER WRETCHEDNESS OF BUNNY.

AN atmosphere of peace and calm, quite religious in its intensity, pervaded Mr. Samuel Thompson's mansion, the basement, with its clatter of pots and pans, alone excepted. It was Monday evening, and the sun was setting in the smoky west. Chimney-pots cast long shadows eastward across the roofs.

Work was over for the day. Those pupils who did not lodge in the house were already bending their course homeward through the gathering shadow of the streets, each with a box of drawing instruments tucked under his arm. Blackstone, but newly returned from Walham Green, sat pensive at his bedroom window, smoking a pipe, and looking out to where the tower of the Imperial Institute was aglow with sunset light. In the adjoining room, separated only by a thin wall of partition, Bunny lay, face downward, upon the bed, a prey to the bitterest reflections. Mrs. Thompson had gone out to take tea with a friend in a neighbouring street, and Sammy sat in his study as usual, dozing, an open book upon his knees. An unnatural calm was upon the house and its inmates, the servants alone excepted—the calm which goes before a storm.

There was a ring at the bell, a knock at the door. Sammy awoke with a start of apprehension, but, remembering that his wife was away from home, relapsed straightway into his

former state of lethargy ; but not for long. A servant rapped at the door.

"A gentleman and lady to see you, sir!" she said, proffering a card.

The book fell from Sammy's knees, closing with a loud report. He rose snorting, and, taking the card, went to the window to examine it.

"Er—Captain Lee-Stretton!" he muttered, sniffing excitedly. "I—er—I wonder what he can want with me!"

"They're in the drawing-room, sir," the servant volunteered as she withdrew.

Sammy shuffled across the landing to his dressing-room, and, after a hasty adjustment of his raiment before the glass, opened the drawing-room door and went in. The servant had lighted the gas and drawn down the blinds. The little old tutor blinked at the sudden transition from the twilight of the landing.

An elderly gentleman, of military but apoplectic appearance, rose from the sofa to meet him. His heavy white moustache, his bald, round forehead shining in the gaslight, and his staring eyes, suggested a venerable walrus. A handsome girl, with strongly-marked features and large grey eyes, rose from her chair, and stood, with hands folded, waiting to be introduced. She wore a tailor-made coat and skirt of navy-blue, a man's collar and cuffs, and a red tie. Her hat, the most feminine item of her apparel, if taken off and carried in the hand, would have borne a strong family resemblance to those trays of black feathers, carried in by-gone days by the mutes at a funeral. The general effect was pleasing to the eye.

"Er—what a stylish girl!" thought Sammy, with a sniff, as he stretched out a hand to greet Captain Lee-Stretton. And that was just what everybody said of Miss Catherine.

But the little old tutor had scant time to observe the person of his lady-visitor. The captain was glaring at him



wrathfully out of his gooseberry eyes. His brows knit, as he held Sammy's hand a moment, then let it drop as though it had been some noisome reptile. In fact, the gallant captain, who, from long retirement and good living, had lost some of the warlike ardour of his youthful days, had been stung and goaded to wrath by the wasp-like tongue of his daughter, who had volunteered to go with him to London with the express purpose of keeping his anger and indignation upon the boil.

"Good-evening to you, sir!" said the captain, glaring into the dazed face of the little bookworm.

Sammy's knees trembled, and his eyes sought the carpet. He fingered his glasses more assiduously than ever, sniffing and snorting in his embarrassment.

"This is my daughter Catherine, sir!" pursued the captain, indicating his daughter by a wave of his walking-stick.

Sammy bowed to the lady, mumbling a hope that she found herself quite well.

With lips set and a threatening jerk of his walrus head, Captain Lee-Stretton went on, "We have come to town, sir, on no pleasant errand!"

Sammy, knowing nothing of their errand, and having therefore no consolation to offer, murmured, "Dear, dear! But—er—won't you sit down?"

Miss Catherine subsided into her chair with a graceful wave of her skirt, keeping a martinet's eye upon her father all the while.

The captain sat down upon the sofa with a jerk. Producing a letter from the pocket of his covert coat, he handed it to the tutor, saying, "Read that, sir, and judge for yourself!"

Sammy drew his shaking knees nearer to the chandelier, and, adjusting his nippers, deciphered the contents.

"Oh—er—I understand!" he ejaculated, with a snort of

relief, returning the letter to its rightful owner, and closing his pince-nez. "Er—allow me to congratulate you!"

"Damn you, sir! Congratulate me—ME! Is the man mad?" thundered the irate captain, striking his stick upon the carpet.

Miss Catherine, sitting upright in her chair, winced at the coarseness of her papa's language, but forbore to reprove him. It was at least a fault on the right side.

The little old tutor seemed to shrink in his clothes, always too large for him. As he stood there, trembling in the middle of the room, he was the picture of all that is abject and slipshod.

"But—er—I understood that—in fact, that you approved of the match," he faltered. "Mr. Lee-Stretton—nice, gentlemanly young fellow—assured me that it was the dearest wish of his—er—of his fond parents' hearts, that he should marry this charming—er—charming and accomplished female. I had no notion that the wedding was—er—was to take place so soon, but I was aware that the nice, gentlemanly young fellow wished—er—in fact, was anxious to take his parents by surprise, that the cup of their happiness might, in fact—er—be full to the brim. But I understood—"

"No, sir! Really! This is too much!" broke in the captain, his cheeks expanding in an incredulous smile. "You would not call my own son a liar to my face, I hope. I say I hope not, sir. We have our faults, we Lee-Strettons, but there never was a liar or a sneak in the family yet. And you may take my word for it, sir, there never will be."

Miss Catherine moved in her chair, and her dainty boot began to beat impatiently upon the carpet. She had not that faith in the inherent truthfulness of her brother Douglas, which reddened every pore of her father's face and head.

"Er—I'm sure nothing was further away from my

thoughts than to accuse Mr. Lee-Stretton—nice, gentlemanly young fellow—of anything—in fact, of anything like, prevarication,” murmured the little old man, tugging at his glasses. He shrank from meeting either the angry glance of the father, or the supercilious stare of the daughter, and his eyes were shifty in consequence.

The outraged parent thundered !

“ You eat your own words. You are not to be believed, sir. You are—”

“ I think it is time we went back to the hotel, papa,” said Miss Catherine, with great suavity. “ We will call again after dinner, and see Douglas, if Mr. Thompson will allow us ? ”

“ Go to the hotel ? ” growled the captain. “ What do I care about dinner ? ”

He picked up his hat nevertheless, and looked to his daughter for further orders.

“ You will excuse papa, won't you, Mr. Thompson ? ” she continued, in honeyed tones. “ We are all very much upset, and *intensely* disgusted at this news of my brother's folly. My father does not quite know what he is saying. Do you know anything of this—this creature who has entrapped my brother, may I ask ? ”

“ Er—no,” faltered Sammy. “ No, nothing at all. Mr. Lee-Stretton informed me that—er—that Miss Woodymill had, in fact, been at school with his sister. And—er—he led me to suppose that she was—in fact, that she was a young female of some fortune.”

The captain broke in fiercely :

“ You don't expect me to believe that, sir ? I'll have you know that my boy is not a liar, whatever you may be.”

“ Papa ! ” said Miss Catherine ; and all the captain's bravado collapsed at the look she gave him, as a house of cards before a puff of wind.

The handsome shrew confronted the little tutor, standing,

her hands crossed before her, like some royal lady waiting to be photographed.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Thompson, that my brother has been deceiving you in this matter," she pursued—the captain's moustache emitted a sound like distant thunder, but she paid no heed; "please not to tell him of our visit. We shall call again, in the course of the evening, to see him alone. I wish, above all things, to take him unawares. May I ask you not to mention this visit to anyone between now and then?"

Mr. Thompson murmured his readiness to do whatever seemed best to Captain and Miss Lee-Stretton. By a violent effort of concentration, he summoned up the presence of mind necessary to the ringing of a bell; and the visitors departed, leaving the poor little bookworm to sink, a mere heap of clothes and bewilderment, upon the sofa. Mrs. Thompson found him thus, when she returned from her tea-party, but could elicit no further explanation than is contained in these words, almost scriptural in language and metaphor: "That young female has—er—has no bowels of compassion." He was still prostrate when the dinner-bell rang; and his wife, not wishing to have him a spectacle for the pupils, left him there, sending up some food and a glass of sherry upon a tray.

His indisposition was the subject of much comment in the class-room afterwards, when Blackstone and Brown Geegee withdrew thither to smoke their pipes. Bunny, moody and unsociable, had gone straight to his bedroom.

"That Bunny is a dam-evil-rude fellow," remarked Brown Geegee, when the topic of the tutor's illness had been exhausted. "I asked him with facetiousness whether he was not very sick from longing for the wedding-day. And he told me 'Shut up,' and likewise 'Go to hell,' as if I was a satan-filthman."

"Never mind him, Geegee, old chap," said Blackstone.

“He’s a bigger fool than I ever thought him. That wedding will never come off, take my word for it.”

Blackstone spoke as one who knew, and there was a note of triumph in his voice. Brown Geegee leered at him cunningly out of the corners of his eyes.

“And if Bunny does not marry my dear beautiful Miss Woodward, you will, I know. I would not object to marry her myself,” said the coloured gentleman, with a knowing grin. “You are a good, friendly fellow, Blackstone, and I love you. I also congratulate you. You will enjoy yourself with her, I feel sure.”

“I’m not quite sure that she’d enjoy herself with me, worse luck!” muttered Blackstone, veiling his face in a cloud of tobacco-smoke. “If I could only make sure that what Jones said was true, and that there was no mistake—”

Brown Geegee went on :

“Do you know, Blackstone, I have often thought myself how nice it would be to marry Miss Woodward. I have often envied Bunny, and I have thought how very devil-greedy he must be to keep so lovely a girl all to his ugly self. She is a nice girl, and besides her figure, which is very beautiful”—Blackstone looked threatening at this point, but his brow cleared as Geegee continued—“she has a mind. She is clever. It is a very pleasant thing to meet a lady who is not loathsome to kiss and yet has a mind. I am sure you will enjoy life with her, my very good friend!”

Blackstone seemed lost in contemplation of the ceiling. What he saw there who can tell? But it was something pleasant, for his lips parted in a rapturous smile—the smile of one who looks through the keyhole of Paradise while waiting for the doors to open.

“I shall now go upstairs and resume my studies,” said Brown Geegee, shuffling across to the mantelpiece to knock out his pipe. “I congratulate you, Blackstone! I am

sure that you will enjoy yourself very much. She is, moreover, a very delicious-sugar-girl, and I love her!"

Brown Geegee wafted a kiss upon his finger-tips to an imaginary Millicent, who was posing for his edification in the corner by the window, and withdrew. Blackstone stayed to finish his pipe, then rose and stretched himself with a yawn.

"May as well get it over at once," he muttered. "I feel rather a blackguard, but it must be done!" And he went upstairs, meaning to have some private conversation of an unpleasant nature with Bunny. But, arrived on the top-most landing, he came to a sudden standstill. His first impulse was to run downstairs again three steps at a time, his second to make a dash for his room and lock himself in. There was a female figure, of fashion-plate perfection, standing in the shadow outside Bunny's door, upright and stiff as a sentry on guard. Alarmed by this apparition, Blackstone stood still, his hand on the banisters, doubtful whether to advance or retreat. The figure came forward.

"Sir Arthur Blackstone, I believe?" she said, holding out her hand. Her smile was gracious upon him.

"A deuced fine girl, straight as a lance, but proud as Lucifer!" was his mental comment. "At your service," he bowed.

"I am Catherine Lee-Stretton, sister to Douglas, you know," she said, reading the question in his eyes. "I have heard so much about you from my brother that I seem to know you quite well."

Blackstone inclined his head. It was the least he could do under the circumstances.

She went on:

"I'm afraid I startled you. You must have been surprised to see a girl upon the landing. Papa is talking to Douglas just now, and, as my presence in the room would only have been an embarrassment, I thought it best to wait outside.

We are all so annoyed about this ridiculous affair! Do you know anything of the creature—Miss Woodward I think she calls herself—with whom my brother has got entangled? I suppose she's not within a thousand miles of being a lady?"

"She's a very lovely girl—a girl that any man would be proud to marry!" said Blackstone warmly. "You should see her before judging her, Miss Lee-Stretton."

She made an impatient gesture.

"Oh, that's nothing! You don't answer my question, Sir Arthur! Of course, men are always taken by a pretty face. But women look deeper. I suppose she thinks that she has done a grand thing for herself in entrapping poor Douglas! As for going to call on her—if my brother persists in his folly it may be necessary, but I had much rather not. One cannot be too careful to steer clear of such people. But I suppose in the end we shall have to buy her off."

Blackstone was boiling over with indignation. He could not trust himself to speak.

"The news made my mother quite ill. Directly she got Douglas's letter she went to bed. Is it true, Sir Arthur, that the banns have been asked twice already?"

"Twice," he assented.

"How wicked of him to deceive us all this time? The lies he has told that poor, shrivelled little Mr. Thompson, too! It is a good thing, though, that he wrote before it was too late. It makes me shudder to think what sort of a creature he might have brought into the family."

"Must have lost his head at the last minute," said Blackstone gruffly. "I always understood that he was not going to write to his people until he was safely married."

"Oh, Sir Arthur, surely *you* have not encouraged him in this? But you gentlemen look upon marriage as such a slight, unimportant thing! You think nothing of helping

a friend to ruin himself, body and soul, by a marriage with some low creature. Surely there are girls enough in your own class of life without going to the slums for a wife !”

She leaned towards him as she spoke, and her voice softened. As before said, she was a very handsome girl in her disdainful way. Few young men but would have had their heads turned by her close neighbourhood and the subtle flattery of her confidence. But Blackstone was proof against all such feminine wiles. There was something false in the soft, fawning tone, coming so close upon her bitter, scornful innuendoes against Millicent. There was something catlike in the bend of her figure, as she leaned forward, her large grey eyes intent upon his face. He was a baronet, with a large rent-roll—a right toothsome mouse, well worth the worrying.

“I’m sorry you’ve taken such a dislike to Miss Woodward,” he said, retreating slowly towards his own bedroom. “She is quite the most ladylike girl I know. She does not live in a slum, although I believe her people are not very well off. Good-evening.”

He slipped into his room, and noiselessly locked the door behind him, leaving Miss Catherine alone to elaborate her designs upon his freedom.

“What a terror of a girl !” he muttered, throwing himself upon the bed. “The chap she marries won’t be able to call his soul his own, not to mention his baccy and his collars and his ties !”

Having recovered a little from his perturbation, he got up to light a candle. An angry voice in the next room caught his ear.

“Poor Bunny !” he thought. “In for a warm time of it with the old boy ! What an ass he was to write !”

He had no wish to overhear the dialogue. But the



wrathful captain was speaking in a loud voice, and the words forced themselves upon Blackstone's ear.

"Is she fit company for your sister? Answer me that, my lad. Would you like to introduce her to your mother? Yes, you're of age. I know that. But am I to let you ruin yourself and disgrace your family just because you happen to have been twenty-one years in the world? . . . Damme, sir! she made a liar of you—made a liar of a Lee-Stretton! Isn't that proof enough of what she is?"

A moaning, inarticulate protest was audible through the wall.

"Don't pretend to me that it was all your fault! You were open as the day before you fell in with her. I always said that I could trust my son to tell the truth, even when he knew it would entail a thrashing. You have been corrupted, my lad—corrupted! Your moral nature has been tampered with. Would you bring a woman like that into the family? Is a painted, grimacing, bold-faced hussy a fit companion for a modest, pure-minded girl, like your sister Catherine?"

Blackstone thought of her behaviour upon the landing, and compared it with Millicent's confusion upon a like occasion. He grinned.

"No, sir, I won't hear a word! The girl or your family—I give you the choice. Not one penny will you have from me if you persist in disgracing us all! You will have to support yourself and her and a dozen squalling, underbred brats upon the wretched pittance that your uncle left you. Your children may go to the board-school, your wife may take in washing, for aught I shall do to prevent it. Think it over, my lad! Think it over! I shall call again to-morrow, and Katie shall talk to you."

Blackstone heard a door shut, and the sound of thick boots stumping heavily across the landing and down the stairs, almost drowning, in the noise they made, a dainty

feminine footfall, no less resolute. The banisters creaked for a while, and then all was silent, save for a fitful, groaning sound which came from Bunny's room.

"Poor chap," thought Blackstone, unlocking the door; "he's had about enough for one day. Perhaps he'll be relieved to hear what I've got to say. It'll put an end to all the bother with his people, anyhow!" He paused on the threshold to look at his watch. "Only a quarter-past nine," he muttered. "I thought it was much later."

He walked down the passage to Bunny's door, and after a moment's hesitation turned the handle and went in. A candle was burning upon a table at the foot of the bed, amid a disorderly litter of books and papers. Upon the bed itself lay Bunny, face downwards, his head buried in his arms—a picture of misery and dejection. He paid no heed to Blackstone. The slight noise made in opening the door failed to reach his ears, muffled as they were.

"I wish I'd never met her!" he moaned. "I say it's too bad, you know! It's beastly! . . . She's a dear little girl, but I'm blowed if she's worth all this! . . . Confound her! Wish I'd never met her! . . . If only someone would persuade her to jilt me!"

Blackstone waited to hear no more. The purpose of his visit was forestalled. Closing the door softly he stole back to his own room, blew out the candle, ran downstairs, and took his hat and stick from a stand in the hall.

"There's time," he thought, again consulting his watch — "just time enough, if I make haste!" And he passed out into the murky, lighted street.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

OF THE MOON AND OTHERS, WITH A FULL ACCOUNT OF ALL THE CIRCUMSTANCES ATTENDING THE BREAKAGE OF A SUBURBAN HALL-LAMP.

THE driver of a hansom cab was giving his horse an easy time of it among the by-streets. He sat upon his perch smoking a pipe, his face aglow with content and beer. What wonder that he was happy? He was a philosopher, and, hailing from Fulham way, he had a pouchful of Twinkler's blend in his pocket. What cared he that the streets were deserted, that gentlemen seemed to prefer the comforts of home to a drive to a music-hall in a hansom, that there was no sound of a whistle in all the wilderness of stucco that lay, grey and mystic, studded with points of yellow light, under the big round moon? What cared he that his horse was stumbling along, half-asleep, and had been doing the like ever since seven o'clock, save for half an hour on a cabstand, spent in a fruitless tussle with a nosebag?

The fumes of the blend were about him, shrouding him from care. The moon—nearing the full—winked at him through the smoke-wreaths with a jovial and friendly leer. Had Twinkler or Jones been there to see, what a picture for an advertisement!

Of a sudden he started, as if he had been shot. The door of a corner-house, sending forth a transitory yellow glow, closed with a slam, and a gentleman of heroic build ran down the steps shouting, "Hansom!"

The driver stared round him for a moment in bewilderment. Then he knocked out his pipe, cast one farewell look at the friendly moon, flicked his horse with the whip, and drew up alongside the kerb.

“Drive to 15 St. Christopher Avenue, for your life!” cried the gentleman, evidently under the influence of some strong excitement—likely alcohol.

“Where’s that, sir?”

“West Kensington. Drive down the Hammersmith Road, fourth turning on the left, after Addison Road Bridge! I’ll show you after that.”

The driver said moodily :

“It’s outside the radius!”

“Hang the radius!” exclaimed the gentleman fiercely. “I’ll give you a sovereign, if you do it under a quarter of an hour!”

Farewell, Nirvana! To the winds with you, ye fumes of bliss! Adieu, thou big, round moon! Thou art but an old, used-out sphere, two hundred thousand miles away. Thou givest but a sorry, silvern light, for all thy size. There is a small, round sovereign waiting but a few streets off that is worth thee and thy light-giver and all the stars of heaven put together.

The lash fell with a smart swish. The startled horse sprang forward, paused a moment—doubtful—to look round, and then, stung to frenzy, broke into a mad gallop. Still the lash fell, with its sting of ten thousand wasps, and still the frightened horse strove to mend its speed. Away they went like the wind! Round sharp corners, where the wheel grazed the kerb; down quiet streets, where the stuccoed portals of respectability frowned at them, as a stately footman at a runaway ring, where all the echoes awoke to mock and gibber at them as they dashed by; out into the high road, where lamps were brighter and men on omnibuses jeered them on to fresh exertions. Policemen

shouted angrily after them, street-boys cried, "Hurrah!" men came stumbling out of public-houses to watch their mad career.

The gentleman waved his stick. There was a sharp turn to the left. The wheel grated on a pavement, with a noise to set the teeth on edge. The cab swayed, and a lamp flashed its light full in the occupant's face. Then they were in the by-streets, where the few lamps shone dead in the moonlight, and the startled echoes, like monkeys, mimicked the clatter of their going.

Again the gentleman waved his stick. Again the horse swerved, the wheel rasped the kerb, the cab jolted and swayed as it turned the corner. Again the whirl through moonlight and shadow of a deserted street, and the silence made clamorous by a rattle and a clatter. Then the stick was raised perpendicular, and the gentleman cried, "Stop!" The horse was pulled up, smoking and quivering, upon its haunches.

"How's that, governor?" asked the quondam philosopher, with an anxious grin, as he mopped the perspiration from his forehead.

"First-rate! Twelve minutes and a half! Here you are!"

The cabman clutched his sovereign, smiled ecstatically, stowed it away in a safe pocket, and proceeded to fill his pipe.

Sir Arthur Blackstone raised the latch of the iron gate, walked up the strip of tessellated pavement, and awoke the echoes, but newly lulled to sleep, by a thunderous knock upon the door.

"Is Miss Woodward at home?"

"Yessir. Miss Milly's at 'ome, but—"

With questionable politeness, Blackstone thrust the maid-of-all-work aside and made for the dining-room door. He received a stunning blow upon the head. There was a

crash, a clattering shower of broken glass. Something, with a touch of cold iron, swung like a pendulum in the air, returning to smite him at intervals. The hall-lamp, weird relic of the Middle Ages, guardian fetish of the house of Woodward, was smashed to atoms. Only the iron framework, with a few jagged splinters of stained glass still adhering to it, swung desolate in the air, its flame shining as a light in the jaws of a skeleton, returning from time to time to deal a vicious blow at the head of the sacrilegious one.

The maid-of-all-work screamed aloud. There was a distant and answering shriek from Mrs. Woodward's bedroom. The dining-room door was opened hastily, and Percy looked out. At the same time a girl came running lightly downstairs.

Blackstone's heart beat fast and his face reddened, but it was only Miss Rose Langley. Jane slipped past him, and fled to the kitchen for her life. She had a superstition with reference to the breaking of glass, especially stained glass. Someone was sure to die, she thought sadly, her head upon her hands. And the chances are that she was right, considering the population of the world, and all the ills that flesh is heir to.

"Sir Arthur! This *is* an honour!" said Percy Woodward, rubbing his hands. He glanced ruefully at the skeleton of the lamp and the litter of broken glass upon the oil-cloth. "Come in; pray, come in! Don't you worry yourself about the lamp! 'Such accidents *will* happen,' as the poet jocosely puts it. Hope you haven't hurt yourself, though?"

"I'll pay for the breakage—you must let me!" faltered Blackstone, rubbing his forehead. "Stupid of me to forget. But—can I see Miss Woodward?"

Percy seemed embarrassed.

“Well—er—the fact is—I hardly think so; because—you see—”

“Let me explain!” broke in Rose Langley, coming forward and holding out her hand. “Good evening, Sir Arthur! Milly has been very ill since she came home from church yesterday. She’s in bed at the present moment.”

There was a strange light in Blackstone’s eyes.

“Would you mind my speaking to you alone a minute, Miss Langley? You’ll excuse me, won’t you, Woodward? What I have to say is important—a matter of life and death, I may say.”

Percy felt bound to say: “Don’t mention it, Sir Arthur!”

Very reluctantly he closed the dining-room door, keeping close to it, in the hope of catching the gist of their conversation. But in this he was disappointed, for both spoke in whispers.

At length he heard Rose say:

“Come up and see her!”

“Perhaps I’d better not; she mightn’t like it, you know,” was the faltering and half-hearted protest.

“I think the sight of you will do her all the good in the world. Besides, I should like her to hear the news from your own lips; otherwise she might think I’d invented it.”

Rose spoke exultingly. Percy would have given worlds to know what the news was which pleased her so.

Blackstone said eagerly: “You’re sure she won’t mind?”

“Mind indeed! What an idea! It’s the best medicine she can have. Come along!”

Percy heard them go upstairs. He listened intently, half expecting them to stop on the first landing, at his mother’s door; but the banisters still creaked. The heavy tread of a baronet’s feet still continued to ascend.

“Well, I’m blowed!” he said, dashing out into the passage, and trampling on the débris of the lamp without the least compunction or respect. “Pretty fair cheek of Miss

Rose, to go taking Sir Arthur Blackstone up to Mil's bedroom without asking my leave! At this time of night, too! She ought to be ashamed of herself! What'd my future brother-in-law, Lee-Stretton, say to it, I should like to know?" He passed his fingers through his hair distractedly. "'Alack-a-day!' as the poet says. It's enough to make a fellow's blood boil, to be slighted and shoved aside like this! He's smashed the hall-lamp—a pretty penny it'll cost to put to rights! And as if that wasn't enough, he must add insult to injury by getting round Rose to take him up to Mil's bedroom. It's disgraceful!"

He strode to and fro at the foot of the stairs, ruffling up his hair, tugging at his moustache, biting his lip, and giving other signs of a mind disordered by a sense of wrong. But by degrees he grew calmer. After all, Sir Arthur was a baronet, he reflected, and a baronet's conduct must not be judged by the common standard. Besides, it seemed likely that he was charged with a message for Millicent from Lee-Stretton—something about hurrying on the wedding, he supposed, judging from Rose Langley's exultant tone and assurance that the tidings would be the best of medicine for her friend.

Having come to this soothing conclusion, Percy abated the fierceness of his stride, and fell to rubbing his hands together with stealthy satisfaction.

"Wonderful the attraction these swells seem to find in my sister Mil!" he thought. "Why, here's a bart. dancing attendance on her as if she were Queen of England and Empress of India—not to mention London and the Isle of Wight—and playing the go-between for her and her dashing young lover, as if he was a pampered menial instead of a bart. in his own right. It's a compliment to us Woodwards, blowed if it isn't!"

He felt inches taller at the thought, and his lion's prowl degenerated to a peacock's strut. The smashing of the



hall lamp, with the costly repairs it would entail, became a pleasing memory. He would tell his colleagues at the bank how that "My friend, Sir Arthur Blackstone, Bart., came dashing into our hall and smashed a valuable lamp to smithereens, didn't even see the thing till he'd gone and done it, he was in such a hurry to tell me some news about the Honourable Miss Thingemybob, a mutual friend, in whom I take a more than friendly interest."

There was a romance in embryo. His brain would be delivered of it, full-grown, in the morning. He hugged himself as he thought of the jealousy this little fiction would cause among his sober, middle-class comrades of the desk and counter.

A sound of the opening and shutting of a door at the top of the house, followed closely by the creaking of staircase and banister beneath the strain of some unusual weight, brought his reverie to an abrupt end. Sir Arthur Blackstone was coming downstairs. Immediately it occurred to Percy that his presence at the stairfoot called for explanation, and, glancing round, his eyes fell upon the litter of broken glass.

"Jane!" he shouted.

There came a faint response from some limbo underground.

"Jane, come and clean up this mess of glass! It ought to have been done at once! What will Sir Arthur Blackstone think of you?"

A sound of bustle and confusion arose, showing that a bart.'s name had power of conjuration in the underworld.

"Well, Sir Arthur?" said Percy, rubbing his hands as the visitor came in sight. "I just ran out to tell that lazy slut of ours to sweep up the glass. I'm sure my mother was pleased to see you?"

"Haven't seen her," said Blackstone cheerily. "I've

been with your sister. *She* was pleased to see me, I'm glad to say!"

"If Rose 'd only let me know you wanted to go up, Sir Arthur, I'd've gone up with you and made it quite proper. She's a nice girl, is Rose, and, to tell you the truth, I have some designs upon her myself. But she's young, and a bit wild at times, and—between ourselves—she has not always that strict regard for the proprieties which is the '*sine qua non*'—as the classic poet so humorously puts it—of polite society."

Blackstone laughed.

"We got on very well without you, Woodward. I'm afraid you'd have found yourself rather in the way. I say, I'm' awfully sorry about that lamp. That's my affair, remember! Good-night!"

"But, Sir Arthur, surely you'll come in and smoke a friendly pipe of Jones—the mixture, I mean, not the man—just for old sake's sake?"

"Afraid I can't stay, thanks." Blackstone made a decided move towards the door, taking care to avoid the iron skeleton of the lamp in passing. "Good-night!"

"May I ask, is there any news from my future brother-in-law?" Percy leaned forward with an inquisitive face as he held open the door. "I thought, perhaps, you had brought a message from him to Mil!"

"Yes, a message—something of that sort," said Blackstone vaguely; and he made haste to put the iron gate between himself and further questions.

Percy closed the door, staring with a vacant intensity of wonder at Jane, who was busy, upon her hands and knees, brushing the splinters of broken glass into a dustpan.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he thought. "Never saw a chap look so happy in all my life. Why, such happiness is downright offensive. It's an insult to suffering humanity, that's what it is! I declare, if I were two streets away, and he

was coming towards me, I should say to myself : There's a happy chap coming along ! I'll hit him if he's not too big. Why, to see him to-night, anyone 'd think that *he* was going to be married, not his friend. Such a show of happiness is more like a bargee than a bart. !”

Then a horrible suspicion flashed upon his brain. Sir Arthur had proposed to Rose Langley and had been accepted !

“Have a care, have a care ! I will brook no rival, not even a bart. !” he muttered, frowning and shaking his fist at the unlucky maid-of-all-work, whom, it is supposed, he mistook for Sir Arthur ; whereupon Jane, with a suppressed scream, gathered up her dustpan, brush, and apron into a compact bundle and fled, leaving Percy master of the situation, such as it was.

His worst suspicions seemed confirmed, when Rose appeared in her hat and cape, with a face hardly less beaming than Sir Arthur's had been. Percy stood, silent and immovable, with folded arms, glowering upon her reproachfully.

“Will you take me home, please, Mr. Woodward ?” she murmured, looking up archly from the glove she was buttoning.

“No, I won't,” said Percy abruptly—“not after what has happened !”

Rose stared at him in cold amazement. “What do you mean ?” she asked. “Why are you so rude all of a sudden ?”

“What—did—Sir—Arthur—Blackstone—Bart.—say—to you ?” said Percy very slowly and deliberately, with a threatening nod of his head at almost every word. “Tell me that !”

She burst out laughing, as his meaning dawned upon her, and replied :

“He said very little to me. He talked a lot to Milly,

but it was all in whispers, so I can't tell you what he said."

Percy's brows relaxed. "Will you take your dying oath that Sir Arthur did not propose to you?"

Rose pouted, feigning a struggle with her glove-button. "Of course he didn't, you silly boy! If he had, I should certainly have accepted him—so there! Now, will you take me home?"

Percy would and did, and such was the force of the reaction from his late suspicion, and such the soft influence of that moonlight walk, that he proposed to her himself, and was accepted before he wished her good-night at the gate of her aunt's house at Campden Hill.

As for Blackstone, he wandered through the streets until long after midnight, gazing up at the moon, with a great gladness at his heart. Astronomers relate that a peculiar redness was observed upon the moon's face that night, which they are at a loss to explain, regarding the moon as a lifeless sphere, whose fires were burnt out ages ago. But, as the journalists say, "we have much pleasure in stating" that there is some vestige of maiden modesty still to be found in the Queen of Night; that, although it is her misfortune on many nights in the year to be obliged to look down upon the streets of London, the spirit of Diana is dormant, not dead within her. Undoubtedly she blushed under the constant and impassioned gaze of Sir Arthur Blackstone, and old memories of Mount Latmos stirred the sluggish pulses of her being. But Blackstone, all unconscious of the flutter he was causing up there, walked on, revolving in his mind all manner of happy plans for the future. He had vowed himself to another and a warmer than Selene. At length his thoughts, tired from a long flight in some iris-hued, ethereal region, fell to earth once more, and he stopped by a lamp-post to look at his watch.

"Half-past two," he muttered. "By Jove! I must be

getting back, if I mean to be up in anything like decent time to-morrow morning. Where am I, I wonder?"

At the next street corner he met a policeman, who kindly informed him as to his whereabouts.

"This is St. John's Wood, sir! You've got a long way to go to Kensington. You'd better get a bed for the night somewhere about 'ere."

But, rejecting this advice, Blackstone set out to walk. No amount of exercise could tire him that night. Besides, he was in no hurry to return to his bed at Sammy's, with Bunny moaning in the next room, each moan a kind of back-handed stab at himself.

"Wish I knew where to go for a special licence," he mused, as he strode along. "I'll go and ask my lawyer in the morning. He'll want to know why, and will very likely remonstrate with me. Best take Geegee along with me to back me up. I suppose it'll take a couple of days at least. If Millicent has the banns stopped at both churches, it ought to be regular enough. But I can't see why there should be such a deuce of a fuss about a man and a girl getting married!"

Before he reached home a happy thought came to him.

"What a fool I am!" He stopped to smite some area-railings with his stick. "No need of a lawyer! I can find all I want in Whitaker. Anyhow, I'll take Geegee with me. He's a useful little chap. He'll swear to pretty well anything, and he can bear witness to my moral character, if anything of the sort's needed. It mostly is in Government concerns—exams. and all that! Hang it all! The Government's a regular old woman for inquisitiveness."

The moon had disappeared behind the westward chimney-pots by the time his latchkey turned in the keyhole of Mr. Samuel Thompson's door. There was already a freshness in the air, fore-runner of the dawn. He took off his boots in the hall and crept stealthily up to bed. At Bunny's door

he paused to listen, but the sound of a mighty snoring reassured him.

“He’s all right,” he thought with relief. “But I feel, somehow, as if I hadn’t played quite fair with him. Ought to have told him before I went out!”

But these qualms of conscience were but short-lived. By the time he laid head to pillow, he was conscious of nothing but a fulness of love and longing, which was joy and pain at once. His dreams that night were a queer jumble of Miss Catherine and Brown Geegee, of Rose Langley, Percy and Bunny, of a hall-lamp, a hansom, and a special license, of Millicent and the moon. But Millicent and the moon, becoming confused in his brain, bathed all this phantasmagoria in a mystic light of hope and love ineffable.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

IN WHICH ARE DESCRIBED A NUMBER OF CIRCUMSTANCES  
FROM THE SUFFERINGS OF A MODERN PROMETHEUS TO  
THE HEARTY FAREWELL OF AN INDIAN GENTLEMAN.

IF it be true that there is nothing half so sweet in life as Love's young dream, there is surely nothing one-half so bitter as a rough and premature awakening from its ecstasy. There was something Promethean in the torture which Bunny was made to suffer at the hands of his father and sister. After that first evening Captain Lee-Stretton played the part of Zeus, keeping in the background, and sending his eagle in the pleasing shape of Miss Catherine—how sharp her beak Bunny knew to his cost—to peck away her brother's obstinacy. There was something of the Titan also in Bunny's dogged persistence, in the fact that his courage, almost torn to shreds overnight, was renewed in the morning, making it necessary for Miss Catherine to begin the work again almost from the beginning.

But the constant dropping of water will wear away a stone, and Bunny was aware that his love for Millicent could not long withstand the virulent attacks of his sister's tongue. Nothing but native obstinacy, added to a sense of injustice and unlawful oppression, enabled him to hold out so far against the alternate reproaches and blandishments with which he was assailed. He was of age, and therefore free to act for himself. From the hour of his proposal to Millicent he had looked forward to that twenty-first birthday, as a slave to his day of emancipation. On that day he

was to burst the bonds and swaddling clothes of infancy for ever, was to do whatever pleased him without fear of reproof, was to slap his father on the back, and hail him fellow-man.

Like the old lady who allowed herself to be prepared for confirmation in the belief that it would cure her rheumatics, Bunny was inclined to regard his coming of age as a fraud, because no miracle had taken place. Where was the good of being twenty-one, of being a man in the law's eye, if he was still to quail before his father's frown, to writhe and wince under the stinging lash of his sister's tongue? Therefore, smarting as he was under a double sense of injury, he steeled himself to a long resistance. He would hold out for a day or two, just to let his tormentors know that he was not to be intimidated; and then, when they began to despair of victory, he would come to some honourable compromise, would find some postern of not inglorious retreat.

His father and sister told him that Millicent was not his equal, that, coming into hourly contact with her vulgarity of thought and speech, he would grow in time to despise and loathe her. Though he had never noticed any vulgarity in Millicent herself, Bunny could not forget that Percy was her brother, and, deep down in his heart, he agreed with much that they said upon this point.

"She's a dear little girl," he thought, with an inward groan. "But it would be beastly to have to introduce that fellow to one's friends, and have him smirking and rubbing his hands in one's drawing-room. A girl brought up among such people can't be expected to sympathise with the feelings of a gentleman. Quite a different class of mind, you know. I was a fool ever to think of it!"

Yet, although his love for Millicent was rapidly paling before the knowledge of his own superiority, so deftly thrust upon him by sister Katie, he got very red and angry when



the latter picked up a photograph of his sometime divinity, and began criticising it in her contemptuous way.

He said, "She's deuced pretty, anyhow!—a jolly sight prettier than you or any of your namby-pamby friends!"

"Oh, yes, she's pretty enough in her vulgar way!" Miss Catherine's face was fastidious with a sneer. "But really, Douglas, I cannot understand your infatuation! You, who will be able to choose among the refined beauties of your own class, to go and throw yourself away upon a little vulgar, barmaid creature, just because she happens to have a pretty face and a lot of hair. I'm surprised at you! I really thought my brother would have had more sense, or at least a little too much pride to lower himself in that way!"

Bunny could find no answer to this. The picture of himself, as Sultan, throwing a handkerchief to be scrambled for by "the refined beauties of his own class," was pleasing. Still, some years must elapse before he would be in the position to throw a handkerchief worth the scrambling, and in the meantime Millicent would have been delightful. She was so terribly in love with him, too, poor girl! She might commit suicide were he to throw her over! The news must be broken to her very gently. He could pretend at first that he was only postponing the marriage for a year or two, and lead up gradually to the truth. But even when he had come to this conclusion, the thought of her beauty, the memory of her touch, would set him thrilling. For a moment, with teeth clenched and fists, he would resolve to go through with the marriage, come what might. But, like April sunshine, the mood was gone, and the cloud of his parents' displeasure shadowed him once more.

Shrinking from the questions which the other pupils were sure to ask if he ventured into the class-room, he spent all Tuesday in his own little room at the top of the house, harassed by visits from his father and sister. Only at meal-times did he come in contact with the rest of the

household, and then he was too much engrossed in his own sombre train of thought to remark the strange embarrassment of Blackstone, the gleeful grimaces of the coloured gentleman, or the reproachful glance which Sammy cast at him from time to time.

There was something threatening and unsettled in the very atmosphere of the house. Even the servants were affected by it, and the cook, a lachrymose lady of weak nerves, was forced to have frequent recourse to the brandy bottle. The little old tutor, in whose foggy brain Captain Lee-Stretton's insults still rankled, was restless and irritable. The even tenor of his life had been disturbed; and he trotted about the house, snorting and sniffing uneasily, in search of some outlet for his ill-humour. His voice, usually timid and hesitating, had a rasping sound, as of a door opening upon rusty hinges. He found no rest even among the musty, well-loved volumes of his study, whither he retired in haste whenever Captain Lee-Stretton's step sounded in the house, leaving his wife to bear the brunt of that gentleman's ferocity. Only in the class-room did his ill-humour find convenient and legitimate vent. To have heard him there, on Tuesday or Wednesday morning, one would have thought that all the "nice, gentlemanly young fellows," who were wont to work in that room, had been spirited away, and a pack of unmannerly, ill-conditioned street roughs had appeared in their place. The eccentric behaviour of Blackstone and Brown Geegee, who for some unknown reason had taken it into their heads to be absent, except at meal-times, was an additional grievance.

What with her husband's peevish unrest and the frequent presence of a strange lady and gentleman in the house, Mrs. Thompson was at her wits' end. A whole day passed, and Bunny gave no sign of yielding. Wednesday came; and with it, about ten o'clock, Captain and Miss Lee-Stretton reappeared upon the scene. Again Blackstone

and Brown Geegee went out directly after breakfast on some mysterious errand ; and again the pupils were alarmed by the irritability of their tutor, which was quite without precedent in all the annals of the class-room. Work being over for the morning, Sammy was climbing the stairs to his study, not without much puffing, snorting, and sniffing, when his wife confronted him.

“Samuel !”

“Yes—er—what is it ?” snorted the tutor, with brows knit.

“Captain Lee-Stretton wishes you to join him in the drawing-room, my dear. I’m afraid something dreadful is going to happen. Do, pray, put in a kind word for that poor boy, if you can. They are really too hard upon him.”

“Er—poor boy,” muttered Sammy, with an outraged sniff. “He—er—he has no bowels of compassion, I tell you, Susan.”

He trotted across the landing and opened the drawing-room door. Bunny was sitting, the picture of dejection, upon the sofa, his sister beside him. The captain sat in an arm-chair confronting him with a judicial air. Sammy had a misty notion that his pupil had been arrested by that charming lady-constable, Miss Catherine, and brought before his father for judgment.

“Er—how do you do ?” he said, shuffling towards the arm-chair, with outstretched hand.

“Good-day to you, sir,” said the captain, rising to glare defiance at the trembling little man. “I hope you are well ?”

Sammy murmured something about a “headache” and “anxiety,” but his remarks were set aside by an impatient gesture.

“I requested your presence, Mr. Thompson, that you might help me to persuade this misguided boy of mine to break loose from the low woman who has entrapped him.”

“Is Sir Arthur Blackstone at home, Mr. Thompson?” asked Miss Catherine, a soft light in her grey eyes. “Douglas thinks so much of him, I know. And I’m sure such a really nice man would add his voice to ours to save my brother from ruin.”

“Er—I regret to say that—er—in fact, the nice, gentlemanly young fellow has gone out,” said Sammy, fingering his glasses uneasily.

The captain waxed impatient. “Never mind him. The question is this, sir: What do you think of my son’s behaviour? Speak to him. Tell him that he is ruining himself, body and soul.”

Sammy gave utterance to a low, murmuring sound, from which the words “nice, gentlemanly young fellow” alone detached themselves.

“There, sir, you hear that?” cried the captain, turning in triumph to Bunny. “Ruining yourself body and soul! I told you so.”

Bunny gave a grunt of dissatisfaction.

“I say, you know! you and Katie have no earthly right to bully me like this,” he blurted. “I’m twenty-one, and I can do as I like without asking your leave, or anybody else’s, I suppose.”

Miss Catherine looked unutterable reproach. “Oh, Douglas! For shame, to speak to papa like that.”

“You’re twenty-one, are you, sir? Well, I’ll have you know that I’m sixty-one,” said the captain, his wrath boiling over. “I’ll stand none of your impudence, my lad. You can do as you please, can’t you? You’re of age, you whippersnapper. Go along with you. Do as you please. I wash my hands of you from this minute. Go and marry your twopenny-halfpenny barmaid, sir, or whatever she is. I wish you joy of her. But don’t you come bothering me for money. Not one penny of mine shall you have. I’ll

not have my money squandered upon a low woman. Do as you please, sir—it's no affair of mine."

Captain Lee-Stretton stood, with folded arms, confronting his son; and his smile was frightful to witness.

"But—er—if I may presume to suggest—in fact—er—nice, gentlemanly young fellow," murmured Sammy, wringing his hands.

The captain turned upon him. "No, sir; you may not presume to suggest! Yes, sir, you are right! He *was* a nice, gentlemanly young fellow when he first came to this house of yours—this sink of iniquity, where, by an insidious process of contamination, he has become what you see him now—a dissolute rascal, and a liar into the bargain!"

He indicated his dejected son by a flourish of his walking-stick.

"Papa!" said Miss Catherine warningly.

"No, Katie, I have kept silence too long. I must give Mr. Thompson a piece of my mind or—or burst. Look here, you sir! This wretched business is all your fault!"

"My—er—fault?" murmured the little old tutor, trembling in every limb. "My—er—fault?"

"Yes, sir—*your* fault!" thundered the captain, bringing his stick down upon the carpet for emphasis. "You call yourself a tutor. You profess to keep an establishment where 'young men enjoy the combined advantages of a refined home and the best tuition'—I quote your advertisement, sir. Your charges could not be more exorbitant if your house were in Heaven instead of in London. Here have I been paying at the rate of more than three hundred a year for board, lodging, and tuition of my son! And what do I find upon inquiry? I find, sir—" here the captain struck the floor with his stick, and shook his walrus-head menacingly—"I find, sir, that my son has been allowed to neglect his studies, that he has been allowed to spend his evenings where he pleased, that he has had a

latchkey given to him, that he might stay out all night if he chose! What have I been paying you for, I should like to know? Have I been draining my income of three hundred a year in order that my son might become a liar, a rake—that he should get entangled with a low woman?”

The little old tutor cowered and quaked under this scathing fire of reproach. There was no courage, no spark of manhood left in him. His hands dangled helpless at his side, and his knees knocked together, as he stood with downcast eyes before his accuser. The muscles of his throat strained convulsively, and his mouth opened as if to speak; but no word passed his lips.

“What return have I had for my money? Answer me that, sir!” The captain again struck the carpet with his stick. “Look at that son of mine—there, on the sofa!—and tell me what benefit he has derived from your tuition and your refined home! I should not like to call a man a swindler in his own drawing-room, but it looks like it, sir. It looks dev’lish like it!”

Sammy groped for his eye-glasses with a nerveless hand, and, failing to touch that solace, murmured: “Have you no—er—have you no bowels of compassion?”

“Bowels of compassion! Ha, ha! You talk to me of compassion. I like that,” retorted the captain, with a ghastly smile. “What compassion have you had for my son, I should like to know? No, sir, none of your bowels for me—nor your compassion either.”

He shook his head decidedly and turned away with an expression of disgust, as though he were rejecting a *bonâ-fide* offer of the little tutor’s steaming entrails, garnished with the parsley of compassion.

Miss Catherine, who had all this while been whispering with her brother upon the sofa, suddenly exclaimed:

“Papa! It’s all right. Douglas agrees to write to the girl and ask her to break it off.”

“That’s better, my lad, more like your old self. But she’ll never consent, bless you! She’s not such a fool. There aren’t many Lee-Strettons about, and she knows it, the scheming hussy! She knows which side her bread is buttered, you may take my word for it. And what, sir, what if she refuses to break it off? What then?”

“But I say, you know!” protested Bunny, with a woeful face. “She’s not such a bad sort of girl as you think her—upon my word, she isn’t.”

“I know, my lad, I know,” said his father, not unkindly. “A pretty face, a pretty face! I’ve felt like that myself, when I was your age; but my father held the reins tight, and I got over it. Well, what do you propose to do, if she refuses?”

“I suppose I must break it off myself, then,” Bunny admitted grudgingly. “But, I say, I only wish you’d call and see her before you make too much fuss. She really is an awfully nice girl—quite presentable, you know.”

“Oh, yes! I daresay!” said Miss Catherine, with her chin in the air.

The captain slapped his returned prodigal upon the back.

“That’s right, Douglas, my boy. I don’t wish to be hard on the girl. No doubt she’s very nice in her way, but it’s not the right way. I’ll make her a present in hard cash, to compensate her for the loss of my son; so you can set your mind at rest on that score. Here, you, sir!” He turned to Mr. Thompson, who was still standing, limp and bewildered, in the middle of the room. “I’m sorry I spoke to you as I did, just now. I was heated, sir. I’m sure you are man enough to excuse a father’s warmth, where his son’s welfare is at stake. However, I fear I must remove him from your house at once. After what has occurred, his remaining here must be disagreeable to all parties concerned.”

The little old tutor, scarce knowing what he said, mumbled :

“Oh—er—certainly, certainly—nice, gentlemanly young fellow.”

“But I say, you know!” put in Bunny anxiously, “I don’t think Milly would at all like your offering her money. She’d take it as an insult, I’m afraid. What have I done or said, to make you think that she’s that sort of girl? Besides, she’s a bit fond of me, you know. I’m half-afraid she’ll commit suicide, when she hears it’s broken off.”

“Suicide! Faugh!” The captain ridiculed the idea. “I know, my lad; I know her sort, and I know how to deal with ’em, trust me! I haven’t knocked about town as a youngster for nothing. Hallo! What have we here?”

The door opened of a sudden, and Brown Geegee shuffled into the room, his dusky face one vast grin. He wore his fawn overcoat, his red tie, and his boots of patent leather. In his left hand he carried his cane with the ivory handle, and a bran-new top-hat. There was an air of mystic hilarity about him.

“Ah! Excuse me, dear people,” he murmured, with a low bow to the strange lady and gentleman. “I did not know that you were here, or I should have made my entry more surreptitious.”

Evidently the coloured gentleman was under the influence of some great excitement, for, despite his profound knowledge of the English tongue, he seemed to have difficulty in hitting upon the right words to express his meaning clearly.

“Mr. Thompson, my dear sir, I have very interesting news to tell you. We have had a satan-good lark this morning. I wish you had been there. There was champagne for luncheon, also funny-devil asparagus—very nice indeed. I desire to make known to you, sir, that my jolly-good friend, Blackstone, wishes very greatly to enjoy the



pleasure of your conversation. He is, at present, outside upon the landing. If you will take the trouble to look round the corner of this filth-evil door, you will behold him !”

“If it’s Sir Arthur Blackstone, do ask him to come in !” exclaimed Miss Catherine, clasping her hands in a little ecstasy of entreaty. “We have seen so little of him, papa, and he is Douglas’s greatest friend.”

Brown Geegee shuffled back to the door, and, by dint of gesticulation and a series of grimaces, the most fiendish that he had hitherto achieved, at length lured his friend into the drawing-room.

Blackstone was faultlessly clad in frock-coat, black waist-coat, and light trousers. In one hand he carried his topper and walking-stick, in the other a pair of grey suède gloves, new and unsullied. His moustache was exquisitely curled, and he wore a white flower at his button-hole.

“Quite bridal, I declare !” was Miss Katie’s mental comment. “How handsome he is !” She smiled upon him alluringly.

“I wanted to speak to you, sir,” said Blackstone, as soon as he had paid his respects to the Lee-Strettons, father and daughter. “I won’t detain you a minute, but I’m in a great hurry.”

“Oh, please don’t go away, Sir Arthur,” pleaded Miss Catherine, with as near an approach to a pout as her austere beauty would allow.

“I’m awfully sorry !” he blurted. “But, the fact is— I’ve got a lady in a hansom outside, and I mustn’t keep her waiting !”

Miss Lee-Stretton gasped.

“A lady !—in a hansom !”

“Yes ; Lady Blackstone,” he said awkwardly.

“Oh, do please bring her in ! I should so like to know her ! I have heard so much about her from Douglas ! And papa will be charmed !”

Blackstone stared at her, doubting her sanity. He muttered "best get it over," and went out of the room. But Miss Catherine was not mad, poor girl. She only thought it was his mother!

Bestowing a grin of exquisite malignity upon Bunny, Brown Geegee shuffled out on to the landing, so as to miss none of the fun.

"Oh, do tell me about her—quick, Douglas!" Miss Catherine whispered in her brother's ear. "She's given to good works, isn't she?—subscribes to charities and all that sort of thing! Hurry up, there's a good boy!"

"Who?" asked Bunny sullenly.

"Your friend's mother—Lady Blackstone! Make haste! They'll be here in a minute!"

"Forgot he had one!"

"Of course he has, you silly boy! Didn't you hear him say that Lady Blackstone was waiting for him in a hansom! Do be quick!"

"I know nothing about her!" said Bunny stolidly.

It was all she could do to refrain from boxing his ears.

Dismissing her brother with a gesture of disgust, she turned her curiosity upon the little tutor. She asked:

"Is the dowager Lady Blackstone still as infirm as she used to be, do you happen to know, Mr. Thompson?"

"I—er—I really had quite forgotten that—er—in fact, that Mr. Blackstone—nice, gentlemanly young fellow—had a mother," muttered Sammy, fingering his glasses. "I fancy he told me that she was—er—deceased—in fact, dead. But—er—I am so forgetful! My memory is not—er—not so good as it used to be. Many little—little facts escape me. Now that I come to think of it, it was his father that was dead, not—er—not his mother!"

Miss Catherine shot a glance at him, of such scorn that, had he not been withered already, it would certainly have withered him.

“Oh, do tell me something about her, somebody!” she exclaimed, as footsteps were heard upon the stairs. “I wouldn’t make a mistake for worlds!”

The captain was surprised and a little alarmed at his daughter’s excitement.

“Why, what’s wrong with you, Katie?” he asked. “Be calm, my girl! Be calm! Hush!”

Brown Geegee threw open the door, taking occasion to peep round at Bunny. His eyes twinkling with devilry, he announced in a voice designed to resemble that of an English footman :

“My very good friend, Sir Arthur Blackstone. And my sweet sugar-angel-friend, Lady Blackstone!”

Bunny started up, with a loud and angry exclamation. His sister reeled, and clutched the back of her chair for support. Sammy snorted and sniffed his astonishment. Brown Geegee contributed a diabolical chuckle from his post at the door. Only the captain was unmoved.

“A deuced fine girl!” he thought, scanning her from head to foot with the eye of a connoisseur. “Real thoroughbred, every inch of her! She’d. ’ve played the devil or the angel with me, if she’d been about, when I was a lad!”

“Millicent, let me introduce to you my tutor, Mr. Thompson!” said Blackstone awkwardly. “My wife, sir!”

“Your—er—wife!” echoed Sammy, in blank amazement, holding out a limp hand. “Your—er—wife, did you say? Do you know—er—it’s a very remarkable thing, Mr.

Blackstone, but I had quite forgotten that you were married!"

"No wonder, sir," said Blackstone, laughing. "I didn't know it myself, till this morning!"

There was a rush, a chair was overturned and Bunny, his eyes wild with rage and hatred, confronted the couple.

"Milly!—Blackstone!—What have you done?" he hissed from between his clenched teeth.

Millicent, lovely in her simple, grey dress, tailor-made for a less happy wedding, clung blushing to Blackstone's arm.

"I've married her, old chap, that's all!" the baronet exclaimed. "You've been only half-hearted in the matter for weeks past. So, as it meant everything to me, and she cared for you about as much as she cares for that table,"—he stroked her hand gently as he spoke—"I thought it best to make two people happy, even with the chance of making one miserable. There's nothing to be wild about, youngster!"

But Bunny *was* wild, and he showed it. He called Blackstone a d—d villain, cursing him again and again with all the virulence of his rabbit-mouth. He stigmatised Millicent as "faithless," and poured out such a torrent of invective against her and her relations that his father could stand no more of it, but brought his stick down smartly upon his son's shoulders, bidding him hold his tongue for very shame.

"You've ruined my life!" he shouted, and rushed madly from the room, dealing Brown Geegee a vicious blow in passing, which that wily Oriental duly resented, and retaliated by a well-planted kick in the region of Bunny's coat-tails.

"Ruined his life, indeed!" Captain Lee-Stretton looked

angrily after his flying son. "Why, he'd just given her up the minute before you came in! Allow me to congratulate you, Sir Arthur Blackstone, upon the acquisition of so charming a lady. I envy you, sir! My daughter here led me to believe that Miss Woodward was a very different person, or, I assure you, I should never have forbidden my son's marriage with her. Accept the homage of an old man, my lady! I'm glad that you have found a husband more worthy of you than that rascally boy of mine who has just left the room!"

"Papa," said Miss Catherine, who, with pale face and compressed lips, had been a supercilious observer of the scene, "don't you think that you would be playing a more manly part if you were to go upstairs and comfort Douglas, instead of wasting your breath in compliments to a person who neither desires nor deserves them? I wish them both happiness, I'm sure! So romantic, isn't it? Quite like King Cophetua and the beggar-maid. Only the maid waited for King Cophetua to stoop, I believe!"

With a sound between a sob and a laugh, she swept from the room, dropping an obsequious curtsy to Lady Blackstone in passing. And her father, as in duty bound, followed her. Milly had all she could do to repress a sob.

"Oh, how cruel of her! On our wedding day, too!" she murmured. "And Douglas! How wicked of him to curse you!"

Blackstone patted the little trembling hand reassuringly.

"Cheer up, old girl! It's all over now! I knew it must come sooner or later. As for the girl, his sister—it sounds a conceited thing to say—but I believe she'd 've married me by force if she could. Yet I don't think she was in love with me either!"

Milly looked up into his face with loving eyes.

"I hate her," she said softly.

"Rather stirring times—eh, sir?" Blackstone turned to the tutor, who stood by bewildered, looking as if, but for the little starch in his shirt-front, he would have collapsed in a heap upon the ground. "Where's Geegee, I wonder?"

The poor little bookworm tugged at his eye-glasses.

"Yes—er—certainly, certainly. It seems to me—er—Mr. Blackstone, that—er—in fact, that nobody has any bowels of compassion except you, and that—er—that attractive young female, your wife!"

"There, Milly, there's a compliment for you!" Blackstone laughed down at his bride. "Mr. Thompson isn't given to compliments, either; so it has a special value from him!"

Milly laughed too, and even the troubled face of the little old tutor relaxed to something of a smile.

"Mr. Blackstone, you're a nice, gentlemanly young fellow! Won't you—er—won't you have a cigar?"

"Thank you, sir. I don't mind if I do!"

"And Mr. Blackstone—" Sammy's face assumed an expression of deep mystery. He laid a finger to his lips as he whispered, "Won't the—er—the female—I mean, your wife—won't she have a cigar too? I am—er—I am informed that many females smoke nowadays!"

"What do you say, Milly?" Blackstone asked, with a whimsical glance. "Say yes," he added in a whisper. "They're rattling good cigars!"

Millicent smiled pleasantly upon the little old tutor.

"I should like one above all things!" she said.

Sammy trotted off at once, with a face expressive of the most lively satisfaction. Though no smoker himself, he

dearly loved to have his cigars appreciated ; and this was the first time that a female had done him the honour to accept one. He returned shortly with a box in his hands.

“Er—choose for yourselves,” he said.

Milly, with a great show of selection, picked out a cigar from the box, and her husband did likewise.

Blackstone laughed.

“Our only wedding-present,” he said. “By the way, sir, I wanted to tell you that I shall leave town to-morrow for good. Lady Blackstone is going home for to-night, and I shall come back here. To-morrow morning we go down to Wulborough. I wired yesterday to my housekeeper to let her know. We’re going to have the honeymoon—all the journey and discomfort of it, I mean—later on, when we’ve got used to each other.”

“Er—I shall be very sorry to lose you,” Sammy murmured. “You have always been a nice, gentlemanly young fellow. And so, I venture to say, will Mrs. Thompson.”

“I shall be awfully sorry to leave, sir. I’ve had a rattling good time of it here, take it all together. But you and Mrs. Thompson must come down and stay with us in the holidays. I’ve given Geegee a standing invitation. By Jove, though, I’d quite forgotten the hansom outside ! Come along, Milly ! Good-bye, sir ; I shall see you again this evening. There’ll be pounds to pay for that cab !”

“Er—good luck to you both,” said the little old tutor, as he trotted downstairs after them. “I shall be extremely sorry to lose you—er—Mr. Blackstone. Allow me to open the door. Good-bye ! I cannot think where Susan has got to. She would like to make the acquaintance of—er—of that fascinating young female, your wife, I feel sure.”

Suddenly a shower of little pellets came stinging against

the back of the tutor's neck. Then another shower, and yet another. They filled his wig, they found their way between his collar and his skin. At the same moment Lady Blackstone shook her dress, looking startled, and Sir Arthur brushed his coat sleeve. The driver of the hansom chuckled.

"It's some feller in the 'ouse throwin' rice!" he volunteered.

"Er—dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Thompson, peering into the hall; but a fresh shower struck him full in the face, blinding him for the moment.

"I believe it's Mr. Geegee!" cried Millicent gaily. "Don't you see him, Arthur? He's there, in the bend of the stairs!"

She waved her hand as she spoke, and her gesture called forth a hearty but foreign-sounding cheer from the staircase. A shower of rice, more dense and stinging than any of its predecessors, rattled about the little tutor's head and shoulders.

It was indeed Brown Geegee, who, in his desire that the wedding should be in every way orthodox, had wheedled an unsuspecting cook into trusting him with a bag of rice, destined for to-morrow's pudding, which, he said, he needed for some experiments in "extemporaneous philosophy." This high-sounding phrase had vanquished all the cook's scruples, and Brown Geegee had been lurking ever since in the doorway of Sammy's dressing-room waiting for the happy couple to come out.

Millicent waved her parasol.

"Good-bye, Mr. Geegee!" she cried.

"Good-bye! God bless you! Hurrah! Enjoy yourselves!" came in rapid succession from the staircase, each



exclamation duly emphasised by a fresh shower of rice upon the unfortunate little tutor's head.

"Er—good-bye again! Good luck to you!" murmured Sammy. "I hope Miss—I mean Mrs.—er—dear me! I mean your wife, Mr. Blackstone, will enjoy her cigar!"

The cabman looked astonished, and stared at the lady with a new interest as Blackstone helped her to her seat. Then, at a shout of "Kew Gardens," he whipped up his horse, and the happy couple drove away.

Sammy watched the cab out of sight, a benevolent expression of bewilderment upon his parchment face. Then he closed the door with a sigh.

"Er—it is really most unfortunate!" he murmured. "Two pupils lost—gone in one day!"

He turned to go upstairs, but started back with an exclamation of horror. The floor of the hall had an unwonted aspect. His first suspicion was of a sudden and severe hailstorm within doors. Then sundry little gritty fragments between collar and neck irritated him, and he remembered.

"I—er—I must tell the servant to sweep it up at once," he muttered. "How very inconsiderate of Mr.—er—of Mr. What's-'is-name. What a bewildering day, to be sure! What with wars and—er—rumours of wars, and marrying and giving in marriage, I hardly know whether I am alive or—er—in fact, deceased!"

"They are gone, the beautiful sugar-girl and my very good friend," wailed Brown Geegee, throwing the paper-bag after the rice, that is to say upon his tutor's head. "I will now retire to my own room and resume my studies."

THE END.





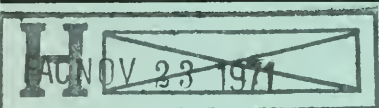




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